

Sports

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World Champion DT Express softball still riding high at 65+

By Todd Forrest
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Sitting in his Davenport Transportation office just outside Blairsville, former Union County Board of Education Chair Gary Davenport is surrounded by plaques, trophies, rings and numerous awards as the fondly recalled how his senior slow-pitch softball team accomplished the feat of becoming world champions in just 10 years.

The journey began in the 50+ age bracket in 2009, and a 2011 SBA National Championship soon followed in 2011. Over the next decade, the DT Express team climbed through the ranks, winning over 40 tournaments, highlighted by a trip to Las Vegas, Nevada in 2019 to claim the 60+ world championship.

"We went out to Vegas (in 2019), played terribly, and lost the first game of pool play," Davenport said. "I thought, 'Boy, we wasted our money.' But we came back and started hitting the ball. And every year but one that we've gone out there, we've finished in the top five."

Having progressed from AAA, Major and even Major Plus / Gold classifications, DT Express has secured nine first-place trophies since 2023 in the 65+ division.

"We started out playing AAA, then when we won in '19 they moved us to Major and we've been Major or Major Plus ever since," Davenport said. "And once you move up, it's hard to go back down a division. It usually takes at least two years before they let you move back down."

It all culminated 15 years ago when a friend from Blue Ridge invited Davenport



DT Express following their tournament championship in Knoxville, Tennessee. Blairsville's Gary Davenport is pictured center-front holding large plaque. Photo/Todd Forrest

to join his team. By 2011, Davenport had taken over the program and become its primary sponsor, marking the birth of "DT Express."

So far in 2024, DT Express has taken first place in seven out of its 10 tournaments. Notable wins include the ISSA Senior Softball Rocket City Spring National in Huntsville, Alabama; the ISSA First Coast USA Championship in Jacksonville, Florida; the ISSA Great Smoky Mountain Senior Classic in Knoxville, Tennessee; and the ISSA/WBSC World Tournament of Champions in Tampa, Florida.

In the recent Great Smoky Mountain Senior Classic, DT Express won both games in pool play by a combined score of 43-

26. They also defeated the Florida Crawdads 13-6, Nature's Best (Memphis, TN) 16-9, and Levin Enterprise (Hillsboro Beach, FL) 18-16 during the double-elimination tournament.

DT's victory in Knoxville has propelled them to the Major Plus classification, the highest level of competition. Since the promotion, DT Plus has competed in one major-plus tournament, finishing second in Roanoke, Virginia.

On the field, Davenport has transitioned to the middle-infield spot (behind second base) after playing at the hot corner for years. According to Davenport, teams may add an extra defender to the infield at age 65+.

"We're going to stick with it [the team] as long as we can," Davenport said. "The thing is, when you move up into a new age division, you're really strong for the first two years, but then you start to drop off the older you get. You also start seeing less teams as you get into the older divisions."

The DT Express roster features players from four states. Members hailing from north Georgia include Ralph Davenport, Marty Dockins, Mike Gordon, Curt Maurer, Steve Palacios, Scotty Welch and Gary Davenport.

Eight team members call Tennessee home: Bobby Adams, Richard Bozarth, Tim Dancer, Weldon Hughes, Thomas Moore, Timothy Moore, Art Pendergrass and

Ronnie Rogers.

The roster features four Floridians: Jeff Cherry, Rusty Hoard, Kevin Hogan and Robert Maguire. Last but not least, Ronnie Joslin resides in Mississippi.

"Most of these guys I've been playing with for at least 10 years," Gary Davenport said. "We still have seven from our world championship in 2019. This team I'm with now, it's the best team I've ever played with. We got a bunch of good guys."

With a multi-state roster, practices are few and far between. As a result, the players participate in local leagues to stay in shape.

"I play doubleheaders on Wednesdays in Clayton just to keep my timing down, but

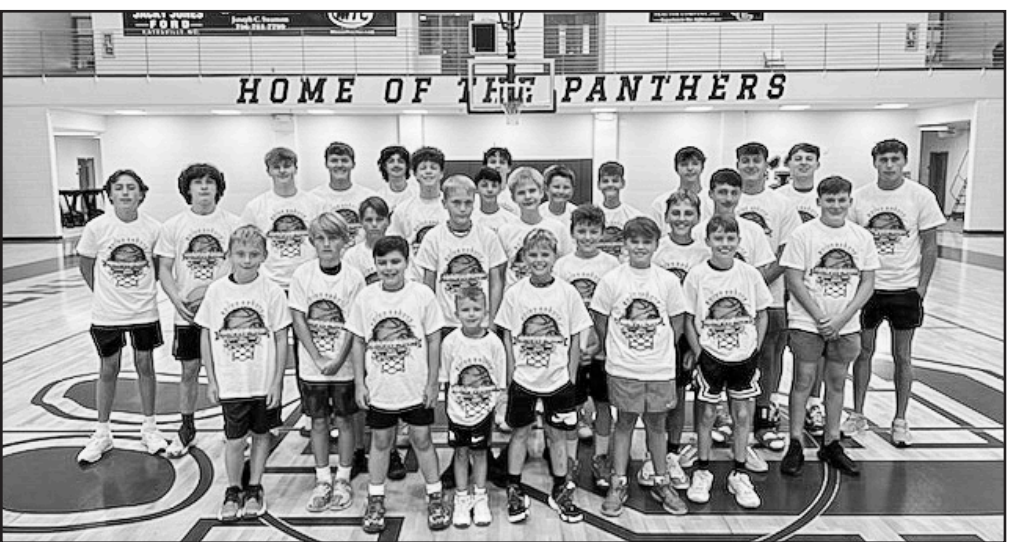
we all live so far off the only time I see most of the guys is at our big tournaments," Gary Davenport said.

As for year three of 65+ play, DT Express hopes to add some talent making the jump from 60+ in 2025.

"We have a big power-hitting outfielder we're hoping to add next year as the rest of the team gets another year older and slower," he said with a laugh.

Next up, DT Express participates in the ISA Senior World Championship in Columbus, Indiana, beginning on July 18. By the end of the calendar year 2024, DT Express will have participated in around 15 tournaments, spanning from February through November.

Union County High School hosts annual boys' youth basketball camp



The Union County Panthers basketball team hosted a three-day boys' youth basketball camp from June 23-25. The event attracted more than 20 up-and-coming local basketball players to the UCHS gymnasium for shooting, passing and ball handling drills, along with games, food and lots of fun. Photos by Todd Forrest

Lady Panthers wrap up summer ball at Towns

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Hiwassee - The Union County Lady Panthers traveled to Towns County on Wednesday, June 24, suffering a pair of losses to Chestatee and Elbert County.

Playing with only four varsity regulars, Union County opened with a loss to a hot-shooting Chestatee team, followed by a 47-36 loss to Elbert County.

The Lady Panthers junior varsity answered with double-digit wins over Chestatee and Elbert County.

time off for the July 4 GHSA mandated dead week before hitting the weight room next week in preparation for the 2024-25 season.

The Lady Panthers are led by a pair of All-Region returners in seniors Katelyn Brown and Ariel McCarter. Union County is also bolstered by the return of 6-foot-2 senior Hope Taylor, who ended the 2023-24 season in head coach Thomas Nelson's starting five.

Joining Taylor in the post is 6-foot-1 senior Aubrie Akins and 6-foot junior Mady Adams. The backcourt is also in good hands with McCarter back for her fourth year as a starter. Additionally, sopho-

more Regan Trlica has made tremendous strides over the summer after joining the program in January, and appears poised to take over the starting point guard spot from the recently-graduated Kamryn Mull.

Brown, who enters her third year as a starter, is back at forward, along with seniors Sloane Dyer and Hensley Adams.

The biggest question mark is who will pick up Paula Robertson's 11 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assists and one steal a game from the wing position.

Robertson, a rising junior, transferred to Gilmer last month. Robertson led the Lady Panthers with a +8.4 plus-

minus per-game in 2023-24. Union County enters Region 7-AA this fall, where Murray County, a final four squad a year ago, will likely enter as the favorite with Union a close second.

Although, every 7-AA team enters 2024-25 coming off a .500 or better record. Eight of the nine teams reached the 2024 postseason in their respective regions with a 12-12 North Murray squad the only one missing out.

Six of the nine teams won at least 16 games in 2023-24, however, only Murray County, Union County and Sonorville advanced beyond the first round of State.



UCHS guard Ariel McCarter is coming off a junior season that saw her lead the team in points (14 ppg), assists (3 apg), steals (3 spg) and free throw shooting (65%). McCarter topped 1,000 career points during Union's playoff victory over Landmark Christian in February. Photo/Todd Forrest



Head coach Thomas Nelson looks on during Union County's loss to Elbert County in Hiwassee. Photo/Todd Forrest



Freshman Samantha Combs made significant varsity contributions at Towns County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Freshman Emry Sosensky runs the offense during Union County's 34-23 junior varsity win over Elbert County. Photo/Todd Forrest

Paris tosses first pitch at 12U Softball tourney



Alongside the Union County 12U softball team, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris (standing - left) dealt the ceremonial first pitch ahead of Union County Recreation Department's 12U softball tournament on June 13 at Meeks Park. Photo/Todd Forrest

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