

Sports

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Union County football renewing interstate rivalry this fall

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A season-opening visit to Fannin County and the first meeting with Murphy, North Carolina in 32 years headline the non-region slate of Union County High School's 2021 football schedule.

UCHS finalized its upcoming football schedule with the names relatively unchanged from 2020, except for two new opponents in Murphy and Riverside Military Academy (RMA).

The addition of Riverside marks the only modification to the Region 8-AA slate after RMA canceled fall and winter sports during the 2020-21 school year.

Aug. 20 at Fannin County - Michael Perry begins his tenure with his first taste of the Hwy. 515 rivalry between the Panthers and Rebels. Fannin County is fresh off its first Elite 8 appearance since 1995 after opening the 2020 season by surviving a back-and-forth 24-20 victory in Blairsville.

While the senior-laden Rebels suffered heavy losses on both sides of the football from its historic run a year ago, the cupboard isn't bare for head coach Chad Cheatham.

Last year's loss halted Union County's six-game winning streak over Fannin and ended its string of eight wins in nine games dating back to 2011. In addition, the Rebels have proven a tough out for the Panthers in Blue Ridge, where Fannin has topped 30 points in six of the last seven meetings.

Overall, Union County is 28-25 vs. Fannin County (including East and West Fannin) and 14-15 vs. Fannin County since the consolidation of East and West Fannin into one school in the late 1970s.

Aug. 27 vs. Commerce (home opener) - The Panthers are winless in 14 tries against the Tigers, falling 32-14 on the road in 2020. The only competitive matchups between Union County and Commerce came in 1998 and 1984 when Union fell 42-28 and 20-14, respectively.

Commerce climbed as high as No. 4 last season in Class A Public before suffering a 25-21 home loss to eventual champion Irwin County in the State Elite Eight.

The Tigers are under the direction of first-year coach Mark Hollars, who comes to northeast Georgia by way of North Cobb Christian. Hollars won 26 games over his final three seasons at the Class A Private school following a winless inaugural campaign in 2016 and a 4-6 mark in 2017.

Sept. 3 at Chestatee - The Panthers will face former-Panther Shaun Conley's War Eagles to open the second month. Union County will visit Chestatee for the series' first non-scrimmage contest after thumping the Class AAAA foe 38-19 in their only official meeting last fall. The War Eagles finished 0-10 a year ago after two-way star Christian Charles, who later signed with Tennessee, suffered a shoulder injury leading up to the Union County game.

After reaching the post-season in year one with a 4-6 record in 2016, Conley's squad has won only seven games since 2017 with no playoff appearances.

Sept. 17 at Pickens - Union County scored its first win since 1983 over the Drag-



First-year defensive coordinator Thomas Nelson will face his former squad when Union County meets Murphy, NC for the first time since 1989. Meanwhile, the Bulldogs will be under a new head coach for the first time since 1983 following David Gentry's retirement. Photo/Todd Forrest

ons last year when they opened with 28-straight points during a 28-14 homecoming victory. Before the 2020 meeting, the two north Georgia programs had not met since agreeing to a home-and-home back in 1990 and 1991 - Pickens won both by a combined tally of 89-0.

The 1990 matchup marked the first contest since Union closed out six consecutive meetings with a 41-0 rout in Jasper in 1983. Between 1978-1983, the Panthers won four of six despite suffering back-to-back losses in 1980 and 1981.

Pickens went 3-6 last season in Jeff Nelson's second and final year as head coach. Grant Myers takes over this fall.

Overall, Union County is 6-5 vs. Pickens County and 3-2 in Jasper.

Sept. 24 vs. Murphy, NC - For the first time since 2004, Union County will host a defending state champion (Buford, lost 49-0) as the Murphy-Union rivalry brushes off 32 years of dust in late-September.

Although, it wasn't much of a rivalry during the later years as the Bulldogs took the last four meetings (1986-89) by a combined total of 134-17. However, Union's luck was a bit different between 1980-1985 when they won all six contests, including a 22-0 shutout in 1983 and a 29-7 victory in 1981.

The series' first seven meetings -- scattered throughout the 1960s and 70s -- were all won by Murphy, including an infamous 1973 encounter when No. 9 Union County ventured to the Tarheel State and left on the wrong end of a 63-18 thrashing.

The Panthers are 6-11 vs. Murphy with three of their victories coming at home (the last being 27-17 in 1984).

Following his ninth State title earlier this year, Murphy head coach David Gentry retired, riding into the sunset with a North Carolina state-record 426 victories (4-3 vs Union). Longtime Bulldogs offensive coordinator Joseph Watson accepted the program's head coaching position last month.

Oct. 1 at Riverside (re-

gion opener) - The Eagles enter 2021 as an unknown following the cancelation of their 2020 football season. As a result, most of RMA's talent departed Gainesville for greener pastures, leaving more questions than answers entering the fall.

Despite the unknowns surrounding Riverside, Union County still has history on its side courtesy of six wins in eight tries against the Eagles. The Panthers have currently won four straight - scoring 40-plus in all but one and limiting RMA to less than 14 in half of those meetings.

Union's last defeat in the series came in 2009 when they allowed a 27-7 advantage to slip away, costing the Panthers a playoff spot in Region 8-AA. Furthermore, the Eagles' offense has been a different animal vs. Union at home, topping 24 points in each of the last three meetings in Gainesville.

Riverside went 5-5 in 2019. Union is 6-2 all-time vs. the Eagles.

RMA head coach Nicholas Garrett has averaged just over four wins a year since 2017.

Oct. 8 vs. Banks County - Union County enters on a five-game series winning streak thanks to a smothering defense that's held the Leopards to just 36 combined points in the last four matchups. Despite struggling to score points in back-to-back visits to Homer in 2019 and 2020, the Panthers have outscored Banks County 90-23 over the last two home meetings.

Banks went 1-10 last year and forfeited its first-round visit to eventual State champion Callaway.

Union County is 24-18 all-time vs. Banks County and 13-7 at home.

Head coach Jay Reid begins his fourth season at Banks, compiling an 8-23 record.

Oct. 15 at Elbert County - Over the last three seasons, Union and Elbert have determined the No. 2 seed in Region 8-AA, with turnovers playing a critical factor in the two recent games.

The Panthers stunned Elbert County in 2018 with a late 2-point conversion, escaping the historic Granite Bowl with

a 29-28 win. A year later, Union County took advantage of several late miscues to rattle off 28-straight points, en route to a 35-14 victory in Blairsville.

In the most recent battle, Elbert returned two interceptions for scores during the second half, quickly turning a 10-10 tie into a 31-10 runaway.

This fall, Union returns to the Granite Bowl for the first time since its emotional celebration at midfield after running out the clock on the 29-28 victory three years ago. The current crop of Elbert County seniors were 9th graders in 2018 and almost certainly still evoke the helpless feeling that came courtesy of watching Union wide receiver Sawyer Drake tiptoe his way inside the right pylon for the deciding 2 points.

Another thriller is almost certain between the Panthers and Blue Devils at the Granite Bowl, where the winner likely keeps hope alive for the 2-seed in the Class AA State Tournament.

The Blue Devils finished 2020 at 3-6, ending in a 28-21 near-upset of Bremen in the opening round of state.

Union County is 2-1 all-time vs. Elbert and 1-0 at the

Granite Bowl. Head coach Shannon Jarvis enters his second year in Elberton following 15 seasons at Mill Creek. In 2015 and 2016, Jarvis led Mill Creek to consecutive final four appearances, winning 13 games both years despite jumping from Class 6A to 7A following the 2015 season.

Oct. 29 vs. Rabun County - As expected, the Wildcats remain the cream of the crop in 8-AA behind the nation's top-ranked dual-threat quarterback, Gunner Stockton.

This fall marks the 10th anniversary of Union's last win over Rabun County - an ugly 10-7 victory in Tiger. The Panthers' last home win in the rivalry came 11 years ago during a 38-14 thumping in October 2010.

During Union County's current seven-game skid to the Wildcats, only one meeting was competitive in the second half before ending in a 45-31 Union loss back in 2014.

If the chips fall correctly in 2021, Union County could host the Cats in the de facto region title game. The Panthers also enter Rabun-week off a bye - a luxury the Panthers were never afforded during the recent skid. The last time Union

faced Rabun County with two weeks of prep came in 2000 and 2001, and the Panthers took both games by a combined tally of 53-20.

Over the last seven meetings, Union has surrendered 40 points in each contest, while the offense has scored 18 or less in five of seven.

Rabun County's 2020 campaign ended in the final four with a 12-2 record. The Wildcats have won 11-plus games and reached the Elite 8 or beyond in six consecutive seasons. They're also riding a 44-game winning streak in Region 8-AA that began in 2013 with a 41-18 victory at Union.

The Panthers are 16-38 all-time vs. Rabun County and 6-14 at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium. Wildcats head coach Jaybo Shaw sports a 24-3 overall record during his two seasons in Tiger.

Nov. 5 vs. Gilmer - Union closes the regular season with a potential postseason tune-up vs. the Class AAA Bobcats. The Panthers have won three straight over Gilmer after losing four-in-a-row in the 1990s.

During its winning streak, Union's defense has prevented Gilmer from cracking 17 points in each meeting. But that all goes out the window as the Bobcats are under the direction of a new head coach after finishing 3-6 in 2020.

Gilmer turns to Paul Standard, who previously spent 20 years as head coach at St. Pius X, to right the ship of a once-proud program.

Since 2001, Standard and St. Pius appeared in two state title games (2014 and 2012), while reaching the semifinals four times and winning eight region titles in Class 3A, 4A and 5A.

Union County is 9-8 all-time vs. the Bobcats, escaping last year's contest with a 7-0 victory in Ellijay.

In addition to the 10-game regular season slate, the Panthers will hit the road on Aug. 13 for a preseason scrimmage contest at Southeast Whitfield in Dalton.

Last year, the Raiders posted a 1-8 mark (one loss by forfeit) that included a 48-0 home loss to Fannin County. Their lone victory came by way of a 21-7 win over Armuchee.

SE Whitfield is a member of Region 7-AAAA but elected to play a non-region schedule in 2020 and 2021.

The Raiders are coached by Todd Murray.



Head coach Michael Perry's Union County career gets underway with a pair of Elite Eight squads from a year ago in rival Fannin County and Commerce. Photo/Todd Forrest

Recent clinic introduces Union County coaches to 'Wenning Strength'

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Three-time world champion power-lifter and former Army Ranger Matt Wenning hosted a one-day coaching clinic last month for Union County coaches and teachers, offering valuable advice on preventing injuries, as well as improving performance during training and competition.

Wenning hosts seminars and coaching clinics across the country and has worked as an advisor for the National Football League (NFL), National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) as well as the U.S. military, border patrol and the Pentagon.

UCHS welcomed Wenning on Friday, June 11, drawing near-perfect attendance from the athletic department, according to Union County Superintendent John Hill.

"Matt Wenning is a high-caliber strength coach who has done contract work with the Army Rangers and just about all of our coaches were able to attend," Hill said. "I think it was an overall success. [Wenning] went deep into the benefits of strength training and provided some hands-on teaching. He took the teachers into



Instructor Matt Wenning (center) alongside UCHS and UCMS coaches, athletic director Mandy Hunter and school superintendent John Hill. Photo/UCHS

the weight room and worked on everything from [training] philosophy down to the actual application.

"The most important thing he did was making sure that we knew the fundamentals of preventing injuries, and that's a big part of his clinic. We just want to give our student-athletes the best opportunities, and hopefully that translates into more success and fewer injuries."

According to *wenning-strength.com*, Wenning has instructed over 6000 troops in strength, conditioning, and wellness for the U.S. Army, including infantry and Ranger divisions. Wenning, a native of Indiana, holds a Master's degree in Biomechanics and a Bachelor of Science in Exercise Science from Ball State University, where he excelled with a 3.9 GPA.

When he was six years

old, Wenning was struck by a car traveling 50 mph, taking a toll on his physical development. Following 12 months of full leg casts and 12 months in a walking boot, his legs were underdeveloped.

Four years later, Wenning discovered lifting, allowing him to see he was capable of anything, despite what he'd gone through during his recovery from the injuries.

Then, when Wenning



Union County's coaches were sent back to school for a day as Matt Wenning conducts class at the UCHS weight room during last month's clinic. Photo/UCHS

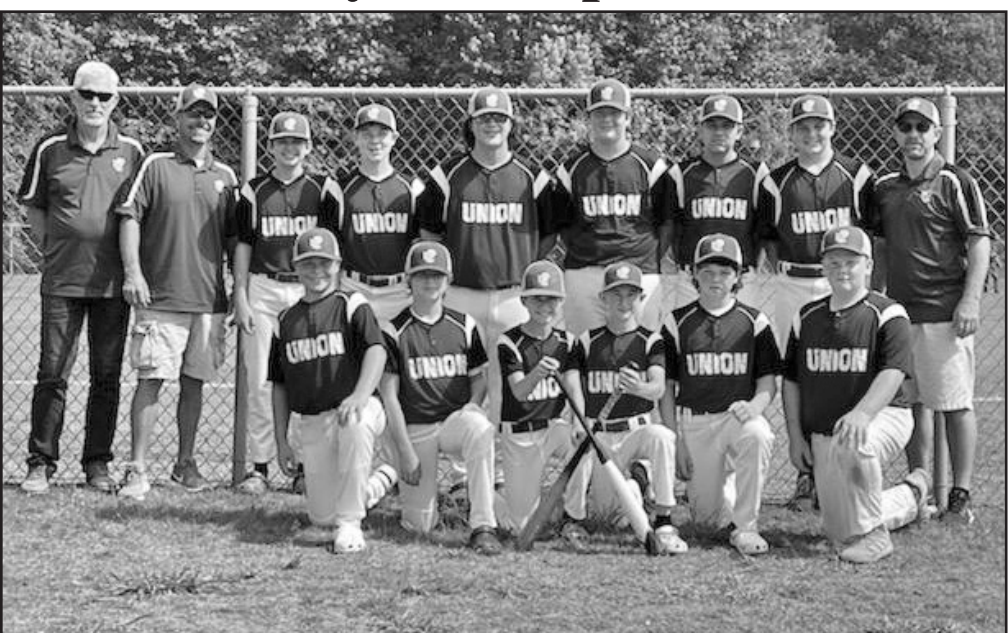
was 13, his veteran father passed away due to cancer, a result of complications from Agent Orange.

That's when he took an interest in competition lifting.

In the beginning, lifting

was just a stepping stone to Wenning's goal of football. But it soon became a larger pathway in his life, inspiring him to attain higher education and become a strength coach.

Union County Rec Department's 10U baseball third at State, 14U place sixth



The Union County 14U baseball team dropped a pair of one-run games at State with the final loss coming to the eventual State runner-up. Photo/UCRD

Hazelhurst - The Union County Recreation Department's (UCRD) 10U and 14U baseball teams wrapped up the local youth baseball season last month at their respective state tournaments in Jeff Davis County.

The 10U squad got off to a slow start with a 12-3 loss to Jasper County (Gray) in the opening round. But the Panthers quickly regrouped with a 15-7 victory over Jasper County (Purple) the following day.

Forced to play a day-

two doubleheader on June 23, the Panthers' steady play continued with an 8-4 win over Fannin County. The next day, Union's payback bid was successful as they took down Jasper County (Gray), 7-4 to secure a spot in the Georgia Recreation and Parks Association's (GRPA) 10U semifinals.

Unfortunately, Union's momentum stalled in their fourth game in 48 hours, dropping an 11-4 decision to the host Jeff Davis.

The 10U team is coached by Tony Hughes, Kevin

McBride, Chris Fox and Julie Hughes.

The team members are Parker Dillinger, Sawyer Fox, Sawyer Gaylord, Sebastian Gilliam, Will Hughes, Aidan Majors, Camden McBride, Anthony Mederos, Jacob Nichols, Hunter Richards, Samuel Strickland and Logan Tercero.

The 14U baseball team also traveled to Jeff Davis for last month's GRPA State Tournament, earning a tough draw that resulted in a pair of one-run losses to open play.

On Wednesday, June



Union County's 10U baseball squad was one of two UCRD teams to finish among the top three in last month's GRPA State Tournaments. Photo/UCRD

23, the Panthers faced Long County in round one, dropping a 4-3 pitcher's duel.

A day later, Union County suffered its second narrow defeat in a 6-5 loss to Jeff Davis (Gold), who battled out

of the loser's bracket to finish second.

The 14U team is coached by Tim Mason, Cody Gibson and Mike Young.

The players are Talon Arey, Brodi Elrod, Holton

Fleming, Colton Gibson, Caden Gilliam, Eli Gwynn, Adin Mason, Hudson McCarty, Cayden Miller, Zach Seabolt, Matthew Thomas, Jaxson Totherow and Coleman Patton.

North Georgia Rapids swimmers bring home the Gold



The North Georgia Rapid Swim Team are back in action this summer. Photo/submitted

The North Georgia Rapids Swim Team, located in Blairsville, recently competed in a two-day league championship swim meet.

The team's younger age groups swam Saturday in Clarksville, with the older swimmers finishing up the competition Sunday afternoon in Gainesville. In all, a total of 14 teams located throughout North Georgia competed.

The league's teams range in size from 94 to 14 swimmers, with the Rapids' 17 swimmers representing the second smallest team.

The Rapids, however, finished the meet placing fifth overall and first in the small team division, crushing the second place team by 100 points. The team's older, more experienced swimmers really stepped up to the challenge and the younger swimmers followed suit.

The team's top performers, earning individual trophies, were as follows: First place boys senior age group, Hunter White.

First place girls senior age group, Hannah Sheffield.

Second place boys, 13-14 age group, Wyatt Nichols.

Third place, boys 13-14 age group, Hunter Yancey.

Second place trophy, boys 12-and-under age group, Andrew Nushtayeva.

Third place trophy, boys 10U age group, Wyatt Yancey.

First place trophy, boys age 6U, Sawyer Yancey, who is one of the newer swimmers and the fourth member of the Yancey family.

Other team members earning medals with excellent performances were Lily Helton (3), Nicholas Nushtayeva

(4), Courtney Foster (2) and Brooke Yancey (2).

Swimmers earning ribbons and contributing to total team points include Thomas Tollai, Ava Wheeler, Tammy Tollai, Kimberly Simpson, McKenly Simpson and Tanner Simpson.

Overall, team members did an awesome job and had a very successful weekend at the league championship meet.

The Rapids Swim Team practices at the Union General Hospital's Wellness Center's excellent facilities.

Union softball to scrimmage Lumpkin Co. on Wednesday



Rising senior Lexi Sisum and her Union County softball team's unofficial preseason gets underway this week when the Lady Panthers host Lumpkin County in what head coach Stephen Mitchell is referring to as "a very laid back scrimmage." The easy-going doubleheader is scheduled for Wednesday at 10 a.m. and noon. Union's first official game is slated for Thursday, Aug. 5 in Blairsville. Photo/Todd Forrest