

# Sports

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## Volleyball: Union County looking to take another step in year three Coach Swanson confident her squad will build upon last season's playoff appearance

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For the first time in its brief three-year history, Union County volleyball will enter the season with momentum and a sturdy foundation.

The 2017 season was the program's first year of existence, and in 2018, the Panthers and incoming head coach Megan Swanson were just becoming acquainted.

After opening 2018 with 10-straight losses in August, Union County began to gel in September, compiling a 3-2 mark in region play to punch its ticket to the State Tournament in October.

Now entering her second season at the helm, Coach Swanson has seen a vast improvement in not only the skill level and maturity of her squad, but also in their work ethic.

"There is a world of difference (between this year and last)," she said. "A lot of them have been putting in offseason work and it's really paid off. We also have some new girls this year that I believe are really going to help us."

"They seem more spirited and they look like they're having more fun this year. They also have a better idea of what they're supposed to be doing. I really think we're going to shock some teams this year."

When Swanson arrived last summer, the Panthers were a little rough around the edges after just one year of on-court experience. Not only were they learning the sport, they were adjusting to their second coach in as many years. Now, heading into the fall, the continuity has allowed the girls and the coaching staff to spend their spare time perfecting some of the nuances that were missing last season.

"They are further ahead than where I expected them to be," Swanson said. "There's



Union County volleyball coaches Megan Swanson and Seth Merritt have been holding workouts twice-a-week in the high school gym before official practice begins on July 29. Coach Swanson said there's been a noticeable overall improvement between this summer and last. Photo/Todd Forrest

still a ways to go but they're willing to learn so much more than they already have. These girls have for sure put in the work this summer. Right after school ended, we held an intense, week-long, four-hour-a-day camp where (the team) really grew up and developed their skills.

"After that, we had another camp with a coach from Texas. It was a week-long camp and he brought in some his players from Baylor University and a few other places."

Union County's varsity labored through an 0-19 season in 2017 but gained valuable experience for not only its varsity squad, but for the JV and C-Team, as well. Last year, the Panthers started 0-10 but showed improvement by winning its first set vs Gilmer on Aug. 21. Exactly two weeks later, in its 30th-ever match, Union County defeated region opponent Putnam County, 2-0, scoring the first victory in

program history. Two weeks after that, the Panthers recorded their first tri-match sweep by defeating Washington-Wilkes and Oglethorpe County -- both in straight sets -- to finish the region slate with a 3-2 record.

Unfortunately for Union County, the region tournament saw Oglethorpe get a measure of revenge against the Panthers. As a result, Union was forced to visit top-seeded Elite Scholars Academy in the opening round of State, falling 3-0.

Along with the new and improved attitude comes an upgrade in facilities. This fall, Union County's matches will move over to the high school gymnasium. The only downside to playing at the high school will be the inability to host two matches simultaneously. As a result, the Aug. 8 and Aug. 22 tri-matches will be held at the middle school.

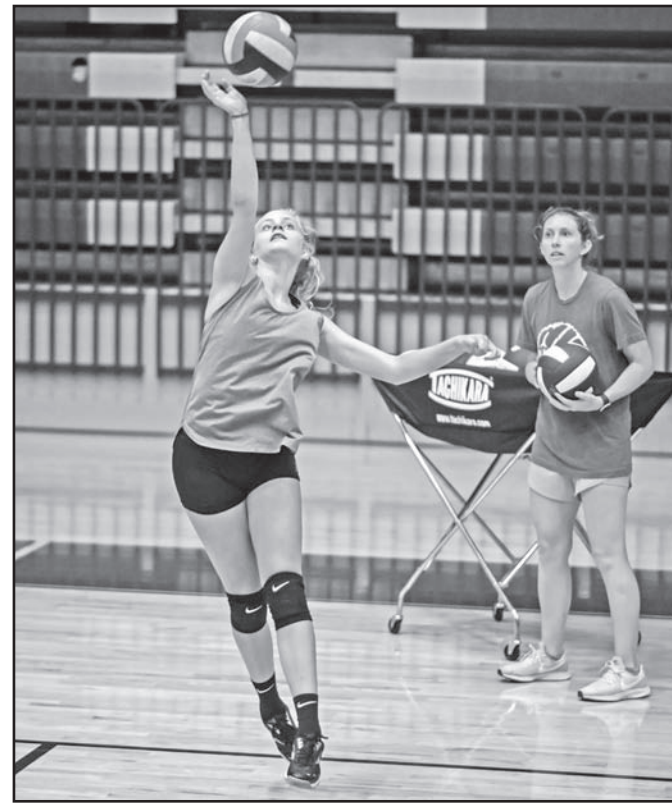
The Thursday, Aug. 8 match is also the 2019 season opener for Panther Volleyball

as both the varsity and junior varsity will host Dawson County and Gilmer beginning at 5 p.m. Following an away contest at Fannin County on Tuesday, Aug. 13, the Union County High School gymnasium will be the site of the Thursday, Aug. 15 meeting with Andrews, North Carolina.

The C-Team will see its first action on Monday, Aug. 19 when Union welcomes Hiwassee Dam for a 4 p.m. match with the JV and varsity to follow.

The Panthers will travel to Gilmer on Tuesday, Aug. 20 before hosting Fannin County and Stephens County's varsity and JV squads at the middle school gym on Thursday, Aug. 22. The final Tuesday of August will be a home contest with Pickens County on the 27th, then Aug. 29 will bring a trip to East Hall.

According to Coach Swanson, Union County still has openings on the schedule



Union County volleyball player jumping to hit the ball during a practice session in the high school gym before official practice begins on July 29. Photo/Todd Forrest

that could potentially be filled at a later date. The *North Georgia News* will stay on top of any schedule changes or updates as soon as they're made public.

In September, the Panthers will host Hayesville, NC, Lumpkin County and a region-opening tri-match vs Oglethorpe County and Washington-Wilkes. Road trips will include Lumpkin County, White County, Hiwassee Dam, Dawson County, Rabun County and Hayesville, NC.

October will feature two home matches -- the second being Senior Night -- before the Region Tournament gets underway from Oct. 8-10.

Union County will feature seven seniors on this year's

squad along with an excellent freshman turnout.

"We had a lot of freshmen come out this year and a lot of them have picked things up really quickly," Swanson said. "Our JV team is going to be immensely better and you're also going to see some freshman going on both the JV and varsity because they've picked things up so well."

Panther Volleyball will host a pair of fund raisers in the coming weeks to help pay for its new net at the high school gym. The first fundraiser is scheduled for Aug. 6 from 5-8 p.m. at Chick-Fil-A. The second will be a car wash at Bank OZK on Sept. 14 from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m.

Date	Opponent	Time	Location
8/8	Dawson Co. / Gilmer Co.	J/VV - 5:00 & 7:00	Home
8/13	Fannin Co. / Murray Co.		Away - Fannin
8/15	Andrews, NC		Home
8/19	Hiwassee Dam, NC	C/JVV - 4, 5, 6	Home
8/20	Gilmer Co. / Fannin Co.		Away - Gilmer
8/22	Fannin Co. / Stephens Co.	J/VV - 5:00 & 7:00	Home
8/27	Pickens Co. /		Home
8/29	East Hall/ Johnson/ Eastside	V - 5:00, 6:00 & 7:00	Away - East Hall
9/3	Lumpkin / Prince Avenue Academy		Away - Lumpkin
9/5			Home
9/9	Hayesville, NC	J/VV 5:00 & 6:00	Home
9/10	Lumpkin Co. /	J/VV - 5:00 & 7:00	Home
9/12	White Co. / East Hall	J/VV	Away - White Co
9/16	Hiwassee Dam, NC	C/JVV	Away - HD
9/17	Dawson Co. /		Away - Dawson Co.
9/19			Home
9/24	Oglethorpe/Washington Wilkes*	V - 5:00 & 7:00	Home
9/26	Rabun/Putnam* - Tri-match	V - 6:00 & 7:00	Away - Rabun
9/30	Hayesville, NC	J/VV	Away - Hayesville
10/1	Lake Oconee Academy*	V - 5:00 & 7:00	Home
10/3			Home
10/8	Region Tournament***		
10/10	Region Tournament***		TBA



Union County volleyball during its two-hour workout at the UCHS gymnasium last Thursday morning. Photos by Todd Forrest

