

Volleyball: UCHS honors its seniors on the heels of program's first win

By Todd Forrest
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There weren't many dry eyes at the Union County Middle School Gymnasium last week when senior volleyball player Madelyn Hood received a standing ovation during the UCHS Senior Night ceremony.

For those unaware of her story, Hood suffered an accident following the first game of the season and has been dealing with amnesia ever since.

First-year head coach Megan Swanson has brought a family atmosphere to UCHS Volleyball and it has showed throughout the year. The tight-knit squad has honored Hood prior to each game by writing Hood's 'No. 14' on their arms and hands.

For Coach Swanson, this senior class will always hold a special place in her heart, not only for being her first group of seniors, or for their work ethic, but for a handful of more personal reasons.

"They welcomed me with open arms and I've always felt at home," an emotional Swanson said following the Senior Night game and festivities. "I've been blessed to be a part of this team and each one of them are some of the kindest people that I've been around; I'm going to miss them."

It's not an easy situation walking into a brand new program as a junior or senior. You're just as inexperienced as the freshmen and it's highly unlikely the program will become a winner during your brief tenure. All you can do is set an example for the younger players and help lay a solid foundation for the future.

"They handled their situation with grace," Swanson said. "They've been very accepting and welcoming and very supportive of what I'm trying to do. I hate they have to leave so soon but I hope to see them back to do alumni games and all kinds of fun things with them. I wish them the best of luck in whatever they pursue but they're all welcome to come back. Anytime."

During the two Senior Night matches, Union lost 2-0 (25-16, 25-17) to Lumpkin County and 2-0 (25-10, 25-15) to Rabun County.

Exactly one week earlier, Union County couldn't have picked a better time to record its first win in program history.

After traveling more than



Union Volleyball's five seniors (first five in front row) following Senior Night festivities. Photos/Todd Forrest

3 hours to Lake Oconee Academy in Greensboro, the Lady Panthers recorded its first-ever victory during a Region 8-AA match with Putnam County.

Coming off a 2-0 loss to Lake Oconee, Union County flipped the script and took out the War Eagles 2-0 (25-21, 25-11).

Junior Adelia Pyle recorded 5 kills and 10 digs in the win while freshman Emma Whicker added 3 aces. Freshman Riley Allison chipped in a pair of blocks.

"I'm so proud of them," Swanson said. "They've worked really hard and I can't wait to see how much more they can grow. I just hope they're starting to respect themselves and earn a little respect from everybody."

"You'd have thought they won the world championship (following the Putnam victory). Some of them fell to their knees and started crying. Then in the locker room, some were screaming and dancing around."

"On the bus ride back they were singing 'We are the Champions.' I thought that was special, because to them, in that moment, that's exactly how they felt."

Coach Swanson believes that playing the established programs from North Georgia and Western North Carolina will help her young squad, both physically and mentally.

"Some of them have had programs for 30-plus years," she said. "So they're seeing what it can look like once you have a well-established program. And we will get there. I'm giving myself 5 years to have a well-established program."

On Tuesday, Union Coun-



Senior Kaiya Wilkes with family



Senior Delanie Skinner with family

ty wraps up region play at Putnam County where they face Washington-Wilkes and Oglethorpe County in a tri-match beginning at 5 p.m.

The regular season finale is 5 p.m. Thursday at East

Hall.

"We're starting to play as a team and we're starting to find a groove, at times, but we still have our moments," Swanson said. "We'll look really good for a little while, then we'll look



Senior Emily Rankin with family



Senior Morgan Garrison with family



Senior Madelyn Hood with family

really bad again." The Region 8-AA playoffs will be held later this month and are hosted by the No. 1 seed. As it stands, the top spot will likely belong to Rabun or Lake Oconee.

"Volleyball is such a mental game," Swanson added. "Once they get that confidence that they can win, and now that they've got (a win), hopefully they can start picking up some victories."

Softball: Lady Panthers looking to bounce back following tough week

Senior Night rescheduled for Thursday's critical Region 8-AA contest vs Oglethorpe County

By Todd Forrest
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The Region 8-AA play-off picture should come into focus this week as region-play begins the home stretch. And Union County has a pair of 8-AA contests that could make or break their postseason hopes.

Coming off a 6-1 loss to Banks County last week, the Lady Panthers desperately need wins at Rabun County on Tuesday and vs Oglethorpe County on Thursday.

Two wins will give Union the No. 4 seed and home field advantage for its first round region playoff series. One loss and they could drop to No. 5, where they would likely travel to Elbert County or Oglethorpe County in round one.

The worst-case scenario would be two losses and the No. 6 seed, earning Union County a trip to No. 3 seed Banks County.



Union County softball players and coaches honor cancer survivors prior to their game with Lumpkin Co. earlier this month. Photos/Todd Forrest

In order to reach the state playoffs, the Lady Panthers must advance to the second round of region.

Awaiting the 4/5 winner is top seed Monticello, who has already clinched the regular season Region 8-AA title. As a result, the Hurricanes have punched their ticket to state by way of a first round bye in the region tourney.

Social Circle is currently the No. 2 seed and was scheduled to play Union County two weeks ago. Last Thursday, Oglethorpe County made the trip to Blairsville, only to watch Mother Nature continue to torment Region 8-AA in the form of a pop-up thunder shower that washed away the UCHS softball field in a matter of minutes.

The Oglethorpe game, and its Senior Night festivities, have been rescheduled for Thursday. As for Social Circle, that contest is currently slated for Sept. 24, only if the region standings can be influenced by the result.

"I don't want them to have to drive back up here for a meaningless game," Union County Head Coach Stephen

Mitchell said.

Over the weekend, the Lady Panthers got in five games at the Morgan County Tournament in Madison. Union would finish the tournament with a 1-4 record but Coach Mitchell chalks it up to the level of competition.

"We didn't play bad," he said. "There were just some really good teams down there.

But we were able to try some things, like I said I was going to do, and I actually believe we found some things that we can use going forward."

The Lady Panthers' lone win was a 5-4 victory over Jackson. Union would lose twice to Stars Mill 8-7 and 10-0.

The 8-7 loss saw the Lady Panthers jump out front 5-0 before Stars Mill stormed back for an 8-5 advantage. Union pulled within 8-6 entering the final inning, then added a run before catching a tough break in the form of a questionable call on a play at the plate, preventing them from tying the game.

In other action at Morgan County, Union fell 6-3 to Eastside and 7-1 to Pike County.

"Nobody wants to go 1-4 but I felt we grew up a little bit and got better over the weekend," Mitchell said.

Tuesday's Rabun County game gets underway at 5:30 p.m. in Tiger. Thursday's contest with Oglethorpe also begins at 5:30 p.m.

Sanchez places first at West Hall

By Todd Forrest
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Gainesville - Union County junior Zoe Sanchez blistered the field last week at the West Hall Invitational - one of the most competitive races on the UCHS cross country schedule.

Sanchez posted a 20:37, ninety seconds better than second, leading Union to fourth in the team standings.

Meanwhile, Luke Gambrell was fifth with a 17:30, pacing the Union men to a fifth place team finish.

Hunter Hartzog placed 35th, Marcus Forrester came in 39th; Thomas Mellendorf was 45th, Malachi Patrick came in 55th and Gauge Patrick was 64th.

In the girls race, Latty Ryals was 16th, Sadie Underwood placed 20th, Lexie Ochoa came in 25th, Jessie Holbrook was



Zoe Sanchez

51st, Rachel Reid placed 54th and Katelynn Rash came in 65th.

Both Union teams topped fellow Region 8-AA foe Banks County, who placed seventh in each race.

Youth football splits at Lumpkin

By Blake Lynch
Staff Writer
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Dahlonega - Both Union County Recreation Department teams earned a two-game split at Lumpkin County Saturday.

9U Panthers - The 9U game kicked off at high noon and the first two touchdowns were scored by No.31 Kevin Kilpatrick. With the PAT, Union led 14-0.

Then No.00 Lassiter Windsor followed that up with a touchdown, and later, No.22 Jaxon Totherow scored a touchdown and Karter Conley converted the PAT. The Panthers got the win 29-0 to improve to 2-1. The defense played its heart out. One of the last defensive plays was by No. 1 Brandon Lynch, who recovered a fumble.

11U Panthers - The Panthers had a huge upset as they lost 46-0. The game was called off due to weather in the third quarter.

Football... continued from 2B

Monticello's last ditch attempt failed when Rich fell on the onside kick attempt and the Panthers took a knee and got on the bus undefeated.

"That was our first full game," Coach Allison said. "Combined with the 3-hour bus ride, the temperature and everything else that went into it, we just didn't play as well as we have in the past."

Stats - Buzzard rushed 18 times for 84 yards and two scores; Daniel posted a career-high 50 yards and a score on six carries. Rich hauled in four grabs for 71 yards; Hemphill had 3 catches for 43 yards and McCombs recorded his first multi-catch game with two receptions for 23 yards.

As a team, Union posted a season-high 564 yards of offense while also allowing a season-high 382 after three straight games of holding the opposition under 200.

Mancuso led the team

with 7.5 tackles; Kaston Hemphill added five stops.

Looking ahead - Union hosts Putnam County on Friday for Homecoming.

"The environment of playing at 'The Mike,' there is nothing better," Colwell said regarding his final Homecoming game at UCHS.

As for keeping his team focused during Homecoming week, Coach Allison doesn't have any concerns, although he will address it.

"I think we'll be fine," he said. "We'll talk about it but I think we'll be fine."

Putnam County currently sits at 1-3 overall and 0-1 in region play following a 42-20 home loss to Rabun County.

The War Eagles got off to a sluggish start, allowing a 72-yard score on the first play of the game. Putnam finished with just 45 rushing yards while turning it over four times.

Coach Allison isn't tak-

ing them lightly and is hoping a raucous Mike Colwell Stadium can give his team an edge on Friday night.

"(Putnam) looks a lot like Monticello, maybe even a little better," Coach Allison said. "They are very similar offensively and defensively."

"After we were the ones who had to travel 3 hours last week, I definitely think we'll have the home field advantage."

Series history - Friday marks the third meeting between the schools with all three coming as members of Region 8-AA.

In 2006, Putnam edged Union 14-13 in Eatonton. A year later, the War Eagles escaped Blairsville with a 43-41 victory.

Kickoff is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. with the Homecoming festivities starting prior to the game at 7:05 p.m.