

Sports

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UCHS softball, volleyball teams in postseason action this week

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Union County's softball and volleyball programs begin their respective quests for a Class AA State Championship as playoff action gets underway this week.

The Lady Panthers softball team visited No. 2 Heard County on Monday in a heavy-weight clash, usually reserved for the later rounds.

After rising as high as fifth in the Class AA rankings, Union County hit a rough patch that began with a 10-inning loss at Class A title contender Commerce. The Lady Panthers would eventually drop four of six, stumbling to the No. 3 seed in 8-AA following a pair of home-field region tournament losses to Banks County and Elbert County.

For their troubles, Union must face Heard County, who spent some time atop the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Class AA Softball Rankings earlier in the season.

Like the Lady Panthers, Heard entered postseason play for a top seed in 5-AA and the favorite to take home a region crown. However, the Braves suffered a 3-2 loss to third-ranked Bremen in the 5-AA title game.

As a result, Union and Heard will square off in a best-of-three first-round series beginning Monday with a doubleheader slated for 3 p.m. The "if-necessary" game would be Tuesday at 5 p.m.

The two squads met last month, with Heard taking a 6-2 neutral-site victory in



Senior Hannah Patton begins her final State tourney. Photo/Todd Forrest Woodstock. Initially scheduled for a top-10 showdown in Blairsville earlier in the year, wet weather squashed a Saturday afternoon doubleheader between the Braves and Lady Panthers.

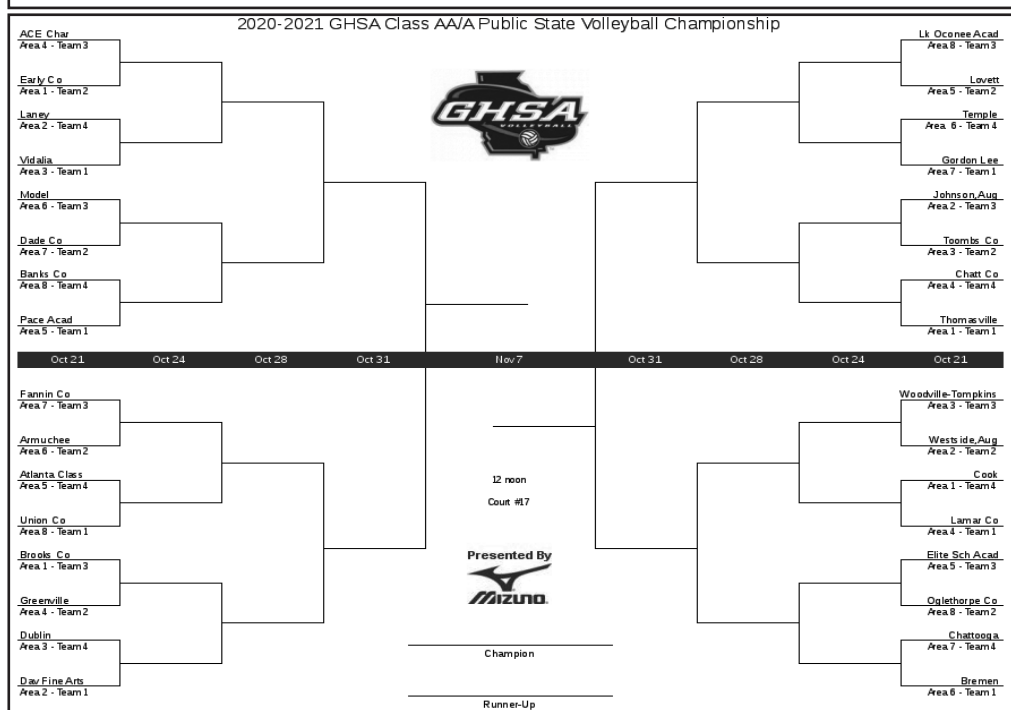
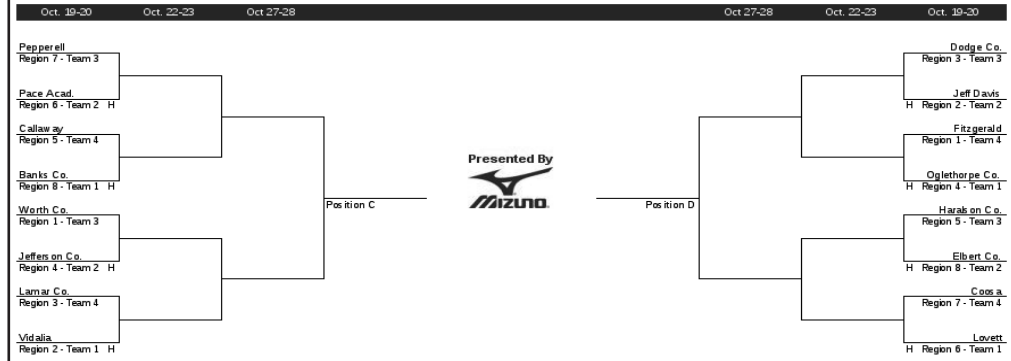
Meanwhile, the Area 8 Champion Union County volleyball team will host Atlanta Classical Academy on Wednesday at 5:30 p.m.

ACA enters as the No. 4 seed from Area 5 after falling to Lovett and Pace Academy in the Area tourney.

The Cavaliers enter the

Class AA/A State Tournament with a 6-8 record after getting their season postponed until the end of August. Like Union, ACA struggled early, dropping five of six before winning four of five to close the regular season.

As predicted, the Panthers could face Fannin County in the second round should both squads earn victories in the opener. However, the third-seeded Rebels will face the 2-seed from Area 6, Armuchee, who was ranked fourth in the AJC's most recent poll.



Stewart 'glad to be back' coaching following first year with UCMS softball

Middle School Lady Panthers finish regular-season tied for first with Pickens

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Union County Middle School Softball completed its season earlier this month with a 9-4 record while finishing tied for first atop the league standings.

Union County Middle School was under the direction of first-year head coach Jessica Stewart, who won more than 200 games and two region titles at UCHS between 2006-2017.

"I loved it, and it was a lot of fun," Coach Stewart said when asked how it felt to rejoin the coaching ranks. "There is a lot less pressure at the middle school level. But I definitely missed the competition and being around the players [while I was away]. We had a good season and I was glad to be back [coaching]."

Union County Middle School entered the postseason as the No. 2 seed after the tie-breaker went to Pickens.

During the season, Union and Pickens split its two meetings, but the Dragonettes took the top seed via their victory margin over Union. In the first showdown, the Lady Panthers defeated Pickens 4-3 in Blairsville. Later, the Dragonettes won the second matchup, 6-4 in Jasper, and due to Pickens' win coming by a greater margin, the Lady Panthers received the No. 2 seed in the league tournament.

As a result, Union drew a tough 3-seed in Lumpkin County, who would prevail 10-6 after jumping out to a 6-1



UCMS Roster: Lilly Collins, Kaylee Rader, Bella Moss, Zady Ludlum, Sloane Dyer, Kaylee Deyton, Jaslyn Roberts, Aubrie Akins, Ila Bragg, Riley Voss, McKenzie Bohannon, Mikayla Souther, Ayla Stepp, Chevale Kinderknecht, Anniston Howse.

much to overcome for Union.

In the second game of the season on Aug. 18, the Lady Panthers edged Lumpkin County 10-9 in extra innings at Meeks Park, rallying from deficits of 3-0, 6-3 and 8-6 before fending off an Indian rally in the seventh.

The next Union-Lumpkin matchup also went extras, with the Lady Panthers surviving an 18-14 slugfest in Dahlonega.

During the season opener, Union knocked off Fannin

County 7-2 in Blue Ridge behind three runs each in the first and third innings. Trailing 7-1 in the sixth, the Rebels tacked on a late run but could only muster three hits off Union pitching.

The Lady Panthers eventually improved to 3-0 with an 8-5 home victory over Gilmer. In the win, Union raced ahead to an 8-1 lead before the Bobcats made things interesting with four in the fifth.

The first loss came at

Dawson County as the bats went cold in a 3-1 defeat on Aug. 27. Trailing 2-0, the Lady Panthers sliced the margin in half during the fifth, but the Tigers responded with one in their half of the inning.

In the Sept. 22 rematch with Dawson County, the Union bats roared to life with five in the fifth and four in the sixth to blow open a 5-5 tie and take a 14-5 victory in six innings.

Following a 6-5 loss

to White County on Sept. 1, Union answered with a 4-3 victory over the eventual first-place team, Pickens County. After struggling with two hits in a 6-5 loss to White, Union out-hit the Dragonettes 6-4, scoring the go-ahead run in the bottom of the sixth to break a 3-3 tie.

The victory sparked a four-game winning streak that included a 5-4 win over Fannin, followed by the Ws over Lumpkin and Dawson.

The streak finally ended with the 6-4 loss at Pickens where Union stumbled into an early 6-1 hole that proved too much to overcome.

The Lady Panthers would bounce back with a 9-5 win at White County and a 17-2 rout of Gilmer to close the regular season. At White, Union took advantage of a seven-run second before keeping the Warriors at bay with one run each in the sixth and seventh innings.

At Gilmer, the Lady Panthers broke things wide open following a 3-2 lead after one. Union scored four in the second, seven in the third and three in the fourth before the mercy rule ended the game early.

As for the future, Stewart plans to return next season, but most of this year's squad will be jumping to high school. Only four players will be back in 2021. However, Stewart expects this year's eighth-graders to make an impact at the next level.

"I feel like there are some really good athletes in that group that will be able to really help our high school program," she said.