

# Sports

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## XC: Union Co. brings home two State Championships from Carrollton

Union boys, Zoe Sanchez outshine the competition at Class AA Cross Country meet

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**CARROLLTON** - Following the Union County boys' second place finish at last month's 8-AA Region meet, coach Paige Dyer promised that Class AA would suffer the wrath of a refocused and reenergized Panther team at State.

Now she sounds like a modern day prophet.

"I've seen our guys run all year and I knew the region meet was a fluke; it was not their normal race," Dyer said. "I knew that if they came out and ran their normal race, they could do it."

Entering the race, Georgia Milesplit had Union County ranked No. 3 in the state behind No. 1 Bleckley County and No. 2 Banks County, but when it was all said-and-done, the Panthers (86 points) edged second place Armuchee (97 points) by 11 and Banks County (115 points) by 29.

Meanwhile, the pre-race favorite Bleckley County wasn't even in the neighborhood -- placing fifth with 130 points, one point back of fourth place Jeff Davis.

Sophomore Luke Gambrell paced the Coach Dyer's squad with a time of 17:56 -- good enough for fourth.

"About the 2-mile mark I just started pushing it," said Gambrell, who was in seventh place at the halfway point. "I knew I had to catch those guys in front of me because my goal was a top 5. Guy (Gober from Rabun County - first place), Griffin (Stevens from Banks County - second place) and the guy from Armuchee (third place) were just too far ahead of me. I wasn't quite able to catch them but I gave it my best."

Twenty-three seconds behind Gambrell was Union's lone senior, 13th place Steven Seiler at 18:19.

Freshman Hunter Hartzog, who topped Seiler for the first time at region, came in 15th with a time of 18:26.



L-R: The Union County boys cross country team poses with its State Championship trophy on the medal stand following the Class AA Championship races. Zoe Sanchez (second from left) on the podium with second and third place runners -- both from Bleckley Co. -- after claiming Union's third individual cross country state title in seven years. Photos/Todd Forrest

While Union County's top three put the team in contention, it was the pack of Panthers behind them that put them over the top.

Sophomore Malachi Patrick crossed the finish line in 27th place at 18:58; sophomore Gauge Shumaker placed 32nd, clocking in at 19:03; sophomore Nolan Bachman was on his heels in 33rd place at 19:04; and not far behind was junior Thomas Mellendorf in 46th place at 19:27.

To put the Union County depth into perspective: When Union's seventh and final runner was across the finish line, cooling down and rehydrating, second place Armuchee had two runners still on the course while third place Banks County had three runners in action.

Later, according to Coach Dyer, it was her runners that broke the news that they would return to Blairsville as champions.

"I was in the middle of the girls race when some of the guys ran up to me and told me," she said. "At first I was excited but then I thought, 'these kids just got finished running, how do they know?' I needed to see proof so my husband went and took a picture of the results that were posted on the board."

**Sanchez leads wire-to-**

**wire:** Reminiscent of Emma Garrison's dominating performances in 2012 and 2013, Union County junior Zoe Sanchez grabbed the lead early in the first mile and was never challenged.

"She's a phenomenal runner," Coach Dyer said. "I was a little surprised there weren't any runners around her because we expected her to have some competition."

After a mile, Sanchez led Armuchee's Chloe Purdy by more than 15 seconds. At the 2-mile mark, the lead had grown to over 40 seconds as Purdy began moving backwards, eventually dropping out of the top five.

"I really didn't know (how big the lead was)," Sanchez said. "Honestly, I thought someone was close behind me the whole time. I was so scared because in my head I kept telling myself, 'she's going to get you, you've got to keep it going. She's going to get you, you're not going to (win) today.' But then I heard someone say that I had a 100-yard lead and that really gave me a boost of energy that just came out of nowhere."

Two years of coming up short became ancient history over a 9-day stretch as Sanchez completed the Region-State

sweep. And as she neared the finish line, Sanchez let out a shout as her dream became a reality.

"My arms, legs and everything just started feeling a little bit heavier (towards the end)," she said. "Everything started getting harder, my breathing was harder and then I started crying. It was just crazy."

"The season does feel complete now but my time could have been a little better. Racing next today is the (Class) AAA girls and knowing that some of those girls will probably run in the 18's (minute range) kind of humbles me."

*(The Class AAA state champion's time was 19:01. Sanchez's time of 20:04 [with no one pushing her] was just four seconds slower than AAA's second place runner and 18 seconds better than third place Frankie Muldoon of Dawson County.)*

"My goal coming in was a 19:45 but on those last two hills I just couldn't get my arms and legs to cooperate," Sanchez added.

In the team standings, the Union County ladies placed eighth with 222 points -- 39 back of seventh place Rockmart and 40 ahead of ninth place Model.



Individually, junior Sadie Underwood placed 33rd at 23:35. Junior Lexie Ochoa brought home 44th at 24:14; junior Latty Ryals was 67th at 25:31; junior Jessie Holbrook placed 83rd at 26:06; in 113th was freshman Rachel Reid, clocking in at 27:48 and in 116th was fellow freshman Katelynn Rash at 27:54.

"Even though (the team) didn't make it on the podium today, it's been a heck of a ride," Sanchez said.

And with all the youth on this year's cross country teams, Panther fans are looking forward to where the ride will take them in 2019.

"In cross country you're coaching individuals," Coach Dyer said. "If they perform well as individuals they will perform well as a team."

"Before every race I like to give them a projected time but I didn't do that this time. I told the girls to 'run their best race' and I told the boys to 'run fast and not worry about times, worry about your places' and that's what they did."

Coach Dyer, who comes from a family of outstanding Union County athletes and coaches (her father is the Rev. Jerry Helton, who coached the Union County boys basketball team to its last region title in

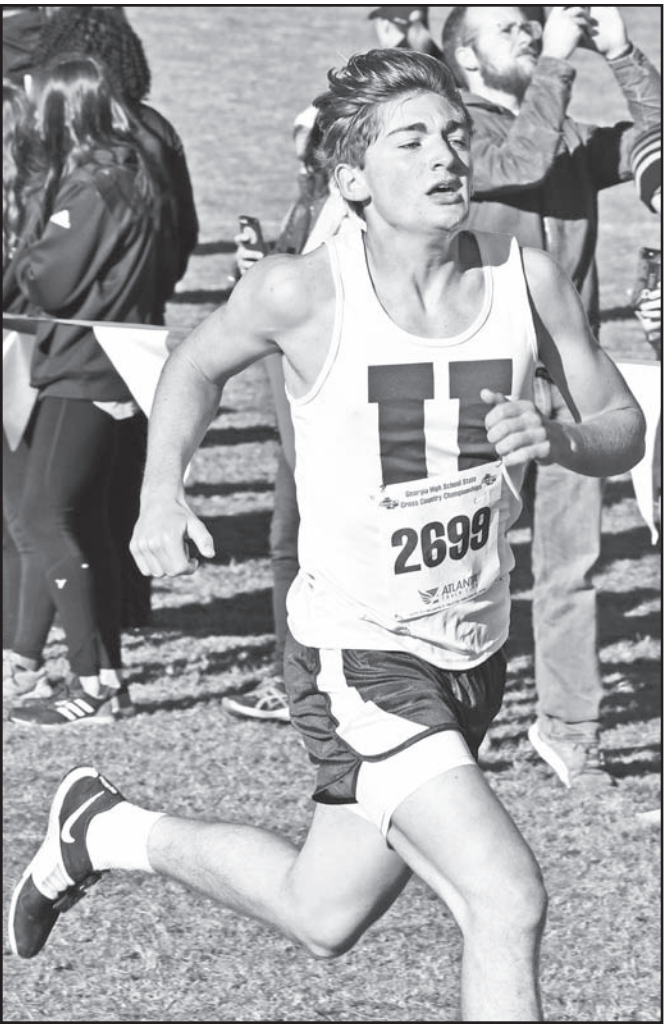
1981), didn't expect to be the one to capture the school's first team state championship.

"I don't like to lose but I definitely didn't go in thinking about making history, I just wanted our kids to do the best they could do," Dyer said. "My dad is an awesome coach, an awesome guy, and an awesome dad. I called him from the race to give him the news. He was a little sad that he couldn't be there with me but he was really excited. Sometimes I think he gets more excited about it than I do."

Looking ahead, many of the runners will join the UCHS track team in the spring, as for Coach Dyer, she's still waiting for Saturday's victory to fully sink in.

"I'm still processing it," she said. "I know it's going to be tough to repeat next year but I'm going to continue to take each race and each season one-at-a-time. A couple years ago I thought we had a really strong team but it's all about who can step up for you."

"Our JV team feeds the varsity and as I look at our JV team I feel good. You never know what's going to happen or who's going to step up for us but I expect somebody will."



Union County sophomore Luke Gambrell crosses the finish line in fourth place to lead the Panthers' State Championship performance. Gambrell will have two more shots to capture an individual state title with two seniors and one junior placing in the AA top 3. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County junior Zoe Sanchez fights back tears as she approaches the finish line to capture that elusive state title on Saturday morning in Carrollton. Photo/Todd Forrest



Steven Seiler was Union's lone senior runner at State. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County junior Sadie Underwood battles with a pair of Rockmart runners near the 1-mile mark on Saturday. Photo/Todd Forrest