

Sports

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Union Co. football reloading for 2016; scrimmage three weeks away

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The new-look Union County Panthers will not only be entering the 2016 season with fresh faces at key positions, but will face seven different opponents this fall as one of the two new initiates of Region 7-AAA.

Union County Head Coach Brian Allison and his squad have been working their tails off all summer, and last month they took part in a 7-on-7 camp at Habersham Central, along with Athens Academy, Chestatee, Clarke Central, Flowery Branch, host Habersham, Jackson County, Jefferson, Madison County, Seneca SC, and White County.

Following the Georgia High School Association's (GHS) annual "dead week" during the week of July 4th, the Panthers were back on the field Monday with less than a month before they host White County on Aug. 5th in the first of two scrimmage games.

The 7-on-7 camp allowed Coach Allison and his staff to get a good look at rising-junior quarterback Cole Wright, who will be the first Panther not named Mancuso to be handed the keys to the offense since 2012.

"We got beat a couple of times (at the 7-on-7 camp) but overall, we did some good things," Coach Allison said. "Cole (Wright) is throwing the ball really well and I think he's going to be a threat running and throwing."

Union County's spread offense must also find replacements at wide receiver - a position that has suffered heavy losses to graduation over the last two years.

Not only is Mancuso gone, this go-to guy, Sam Gilbert also ran out of eligibility, leaving the Panthers coaching staff scrambling to replace their leading receiver for the second consecutive season. Knox Kiernan also graduated in May and since Union's No. 3 receiver was Wright, and he can't play two positions, the Panthers must attempt to replace 114 catches, 2,000-plus yards, and 22 TDs at the wide out position.

Allison expects rising-senior Slade Thompson, the team's top returning pass catcher, to anchor a young receiving corps.

One area where Union County returns some depth is at running back. While Mancuso accounted for the majority of this team's rushing yards over the last two years, rising-senior Bo Lynch and rising-junior Cole Dockrey have quietly developed into a talented 1-2 punch in the backfield.

Despite missing the first two games of the season, Lynch finished 2015 with 746 rushing yards and 8 scores. Meanwhile, Dockrey was averaging more than 15 yards-per-carry when he broke this arm attempting to make a tackle during the second game of the year. The injury forced Dockrey to miss the majority of the season but he still finished with 235 rushing



Top: Head Coach Brian Allison (second from left) and Assistant Coach Greg Chambers (third from left) work on defensive reads earlier this week. The Panthers and the coaching staff split in groups - based on position - as they prepare for the 2016 season. Photos by Todd Forrest

yards in just 3.5 games. Coach Allison also expects Dockrey to provide a significant contribution on both sides of the ball

Rising-senior Nic Rodriguez was Union's short-yardage specialist in 2015 and was third on the team with three touchdowns. However, with the amount of backfield depth, Rodriguez could see more action at wide receiver in 2016. He also played an important role on defense last season.

Much of the success of Wright and company will be determined by an offensive line that returns three starters: Blane Brown, Tyler McConnell, and

Dawson Groves. When asked about the O-line's progress, Coach Allison's reply was short and sweet, "they're looking good."

For the first time in a very long time, the Panthers will enter the season with the defense as one of the team's strengths. UC's top two tacklers Chris Thompson and Luke Winkler were both junior linebackers in 2015, and despite Winkler missing 2-plus games, the duo still combined for more than 250 tackles.

"We're going to be better (defensively) this year," Coach Allison said. "Two inside linebackers, a couple of DBs (de-

fensive backs), and all three defensive linemen coming back will be a major bonus."

Rising-senior safety Zach Stone also returns after finishing third on the team with 79 tackles, as does fifth leading tackler, rising-junior RJ Banton, who led the team with 4 sacks and 16 tackles-for-loss. Chandler Day and Matthew Beise also return to anchor the Panthers D-line in 2016.

Coach Allison is still looking for a kicker but is confident that he will find someone to replace Kiernan. Banton, who shared punting duties last year, is the front runner at that position.

"We've got some spots that we feel good about experience-wise, but we also have some spots where we lack experience," said Coach Allison, when asked to grade the first month of summer workouts. "We still have a lot of unknowns left but I would give the team a (grade of) B."

After scrimmaging White County on Aug. 5, the Panthers will host Rabun Gap on Aug. 18 in another scrimmage contest before the regular season arrives on Aug. 26.

When the season kicks off, Andrews, NC, Fannin County, and Lumpkin County will be the

only familiar faces on the Panthers' schedule. Here's a glimpse at the teams on the upcoming schedule that Union didn't face last season:

Union will meet Gilmer County in the home opener where the Bobcats will be coming off a 4-6 season in Class AAAA. The matchup will revive a series that has been dormant since 1997.

In Week 2, the Panthers will host Hayesville, NC as the two teams square off for the first time since 2009. The Yellow Jackets are coming off a 3-win season that saw them go 0-6 in the Smokey Mountain Conference in what was considered a rebuilding year by many around Clay County, NC.

Following the Hayesville contest, Union will begin a three-game road stretch, beginning with their replacement in Region 8-AA, Banks County on Sept. 16. The Leopards finished 5-5 in Region 7-AAA last season - highlighted by a 52-28 drubbing of Fannin County.

On Sept. 23rd the Panthers will pay a visit to the odds-on favorite in Region 7-AAA, Greater Atlanta Christian. The Spartans reached the Class AA Final Four in 2015 where they fell to eventual State Champ Pace Academy - a team GAC defeated rather easily back in October by a score of 33-13, en route to a Region 6-AA title and a 12-2 overall record.

Union returns home on Sept. 30 when they take on East Hall, a Class AAA State playoff team from 2015. The Vikings finished 6-5 following a season-ending, 49-28 loss to Sonorville in the opening round.

The Panthers are back on the road Oct. 7 as they visit another top-tier team in 7-AAA, the Dawson County Tigers who are coming off a trip to the Class AAA Elite 8 last November. Dawson is the largest school in the region and featured 90 players on last year's roster.

One week later, Union welcomes North Hall to Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium for the first time since 1967. Separated by less than 50 miles, the two schools have only met three times: 1957, 1966, and 1967 with Union winning all three.

However, this isn't your grandfather's Trojans squad as they will be dropping down from Class AAAA, where they made the playoffs with 6-wins in a region that included Buford.

This Thursday morning at 9:30 a.m., Union County will host five teams in a passing camp before welcoming Chestatee for a camp on Monday and Tuesday.

The first day for official practice begins on July 25 but the GHS will not allow practice in full pads until Aug. 1.

According to Allison, the next three weeks, conditioning will be the focus and hopes his team is prepared to get to work when they strap on their helmets next month.

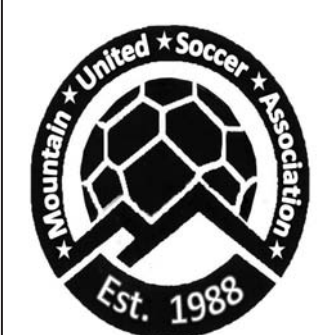
"We'll work on fundamentals and try to get them squared away so when it's time to go full speed, we'll be ready," he said.



2016 Union Co. varsity football schedule

August 5	H	White County (Scrimmage)	7:00
August 18	H	Rabun Gap (Scrimmage)	7:00
August 26	H	Gilmer County	7:30
September 2	H	Hayesville, NC	7:30
September 9	A	Andrews, NC	7:30
September 16	A	Banks County	7:30
September 23	A	Greater Atlanta Christian	7:30
September 30	H	East Hall	7:30
October 7	A	Dawson County	7:30
October 14	H	North Hall	7:30
October 21		OPEN	
October 28	A	Fannin County	7:30
November 4	H	Lumpkin County	7:30

MUSA Fall Registration



Fall soccer registration is open for age groups U6-U16

Register online at

www.mountainsoccer.org
Registration forms are also available to print from the website. Forms can be mailed to P. O. Box 1862, Blairsville, GA 30514.

Deadline to register is July 17, 2016.

For additional information please check out our website at www.mountainsoccer.org or email us at musa.soccer@gmail.com.