

Sports

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Softball: Expectations soar as opening day nears

Lady Panthers to host Haralson, Lumpkin and White this weekend

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The 2020 edition of Union County softball gets underway at home this weekend, beginning with Friday's season opener vs. White County, followed by a pair of Saturday contests vs. Haralson County and Lumpkin County.

Third-year coach Stephen Mitchell is looking to take another step forward after guiding the Lady Panthers to consecutive 16-win campaigns and a pair of state playoff berths. But this fall marks the deepest, most experienced squad during Mitchell's tenure as Union County returns seven starters from a team that advanced to the Sweet 16 after nearly upsetting the eventual State Champion Banks County during the Region 8-AA title game.

"We have a lot of experience and I think that will really show this year, but the key for us is going to be putting runs on the board," Mitchell said. "That's been one of our biggest struggles the last few years."

To continue their upward trajectory in year-three under Mitchell, the Lady Panthers will once again lean upon senior pitcher Trinity Queen. As a junior, Queen earned Region 8-AA Pitcher of the Year honors, posting a 2.44 ERA and a 1.15 WHIP while fanning 81 batters to just 17 walks in 91 2/3 innings of work.

Queen, who splits time at first base, is also dangerous at the plate, especially in the clutch. In 2019, Queen led the team with nine two-out RBIs. Additionally, her 16 total RBIs are the most among returning players.

Behind the plate is four-year starter Hannah Patton, who began her career as a freshman infielder before moving to catcher midway through her sophomore year. Patton earned All-Region honors in 2019 after throwing out 30% of would-be base stealers and committing only two errors.

She also proved capable of handling the bat, finishing among the team's top-three in homers, doubles, triples and walks while placing fourth in slugging percentage, OPS and hits.

Junior outfielder Lexi Sisum returns after anchoring the No. 2 slot in the Union lineup a year ago. Among returning players, Sisum is Union County's leader in a wide array of offensive categories, including a .348 batting average, a .375 on-base percentage, a .543 slugging percentage, a



The Lady Panthers softball team began official practices on Monday leading up to a full slate of games this weekend. Photo/Todd Forrest

.918 OPS, 32 hits, six doubles, five stolen bases and two homers. The all-region lefty also ranked atop last year's squad with 22 runs and three triples; her 14 RBIs were third-most on the team.

The Lady Panthers return most of their starting infield minus shortstop Miranda Lockaby. Junior third baseman Caley Davis will anchor the hot corner after proving herself as one of the toughest strikeouts in Region 8-AA. In 75 plate appearances, Davis was the victim of only six Ks (five swinging, one looking).

Another junior infielder to keep an eye on is Emma Roxbury. As a sophomore, Roxbury's .328 batting average was third-highest on the team, as was her .348 OBP, .375 slugging and .723 OPS.

Additionally, sophomore catcher-infielder Emily Byers could significantly impact the Union County lineup after transferring from Hayesville, North Carolina. As a freshman, Byers led the Lady Yellow Jackets with a .408 batting average and placed third with 14 runs.

Other infielders hoping for a breakthrough season in 2020 are sophomore Chloe Potts, juniors Adaley Burnette, Rebekah Chambers, Kaelyn Jones, Tori Tracy and a handful of ninth graders.

"Roxbury, Potts and Adaley (Burnette) are all kind of fighting for the shortstop

position right now," Mitchell said. "At first base, we have four or five girls that are all trying to find some playing time. Overall, we have about 14 or 16 kids that could contribute on varsity this year."

Burnette is also battling to replace Megan Bright as Union County's No. 2 pitcher behind Queen.

Other pitchers to watch are Tracy and freshmen Sierra Burnette and Jewell Massey.

"We have four pitchers with the potential to be our No. 2," Mitchell said. "For now, we're going to get them all some work in JV and varsity games and see which one is able to emerge. All you can do is give them each an opportunity to show what they're capable of."

In the outfield, juniors Aubrie Banton, Ansley Collins, sophomore Caroline Karnes and a talented crop of freshmen are hoping to replace All-State centerfielder Mary Wischmeyer.

"It's going to be difficult to fill the void left by (Wischmeyer's) bat, and that's something we'll need to do by committee, but I do believe we have some girls who are ready to break out this season," Mitchell said.

In 2019, Collins drove in eight runs and scored seven times in 72 plate appearances. Banton hit .276 in 29 at-bats; Karnes recorded an RBI single in her only plate appearance.

With only four teams in Region 8-AA, Union County will receive a month of tune-ups before opening the region slate with defending State Champion Banks County on Sept. 22.

"Without a summer league, those first 10 games will be very important for us to play as many girls as possible," Mitchell said. "With COVID, we have to prepare for the possibility of someone testing positive and missing a few weeks. And in the meantime, we have to be able to put out

a lineup that can still compete. So for those first few weeks, we're going to treat it just like a summer schedule - the only difference is, we're playing to win."

Although, the non-region slate is no pushover with nine of their 12 opponents qualifying for the state tournament a year ago. The Lady Panthers will face Trion and Commerce, who finished second and third, respectively, in Class A Public. East Hall, Heard County and Lumpkin County all advanced to the Elite 8; Christian Heri-

tage reached the second round of Class A Private.

Other playoff teams on the schedule include Haralson County, Chattooga and Holy Innocents. Union's non-playoff opponents consist of Fanning County, Southeast Whitfield and White County.

Weekend Schedule and Safety Measures

Friday's opener with White County will get underway at 6 p.m. On Saturday, the Lady Panthers will host Haralson County at 11 a.m. and Lumpkin County at 3 p.m.

"This weekend, we're going to try and get all the girls some work so we can see where we stand," Mitchell said.

Despite minimal practice time, Mitchell is confident the Lady Panthers are ready for action on Friday. And if they're not, it will be due to rust, which he feels every team is dealing with following restricted summer workouts.

"I think (the girls are ready to play), but if I had to guess, I would say every coach in the state is struggling a little since their teams haven't seen much live pitching," he said. "Pitching is usually a little ahead of hitting early in the season, and I think this year might be a little worse."

According to Mitchell, a scaled-back concession stand will be available this weekend. As for seating, social distancing is required by the GHSA, so fans unable to spread out in the bleachers or behind home plate are encouraged to bring lawn chairs and relocate around the outfield fence.

As previously reported, the extended dugouts will greatly reduce seating behind first and third base.



Trinity Queen fine tunes her bunting skills during the final week of summer workouts. Photo/Todd Forrest



Third-year head coach Stephen Mitchell assembled a grueling non-region schedule to prepare his team for region play and the postseason. Photo/Todd Forrest



2020 UCHS Softball Schedule

Date	Opponent	Location	Time
8/7	White Co	Home	6:00*
8/8	Lumpkin Co	Home	11:00
8/8	Haralson Co	Home	3:00
8/11	White Co	Away	6:00*
8/14	Chattooga	Dalton	4:00
8/14	Southeast	Dalton	8:00
8/15	Trion	Dalton	10:45
8/15	Christian Heritage	Dalton	12:15
8/15	Holy Innocents	Dalton	
8/17	Commerce	Away	7:00*
8/22	Heard Co	Home	11:00
8/22	Heard Co	Home	1:00
8/24	East Hall	Away	7:00*
8/27	Fanning Co	Home	5:00**
8/31	Lumpkin Co	Away	TBA*
9/3	Commerce	Home	5:00**
9/8	Fanning Co	Away	5:55*
9/10	Banks Co R	Home	5:30
9/15	Elbert Co R	Away	5:30
9/17	Rabun Co R	Away	5:30
9/22	Banks Co R	Away	5:30
9/24	Elbert Co R	Home	5:30
9/29	Rabun Co R	Home	5:30
10/1	Gilmer Co	Away	6:00*
10/6	Region Tourney	TBA	TBA
10/7	Region Tourney	TBA	TBA