

Sports

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Softball: Union's saving 'Gracie' delivers again

Gracie Gladding's late-inning heroics power Lady Panthers past Banks

By Todd Forrest
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Union County junior catcher Gracie Gladding belted a go-ahead two-run homer in the bottom of the sixth inning to edge Banks County 3-2 and help the Lady Panthers (11-6, 4-0) secure a stranglehold atop the Region 8-AA standings.

The estimated 300-foot bomb to left-center marked Gladding's second clutch home run in the last 21 games after she delivered a go-ahead homer in the deciding-game two of last year's Sweet 16 series vs. Toombs County.

"A shout out to my dad [because] he's always working with me," Gladding said when asked how she continues to come through in big moments. "But I don't really know. I just practice a lot outside of regular practices and put in a lot of extra work in my spare time."

Gladding's fifth homer of 2022 came at an opportune moment for the Lady Panthers, who had just surrendered the lead in the top half of the frame. Junior Sierra Burnette took a 1-0 shutout into the sixth until a one-out error set the stage for some Banks County two-out magic. One strike away from stranding two runners in scoring position, Burnette allowed a two-run single to left that dealt Union its first deficit of the contest.

But they wouldn't trail for long as junior Katie Byers drew a four-pitch walk to open the bottom of the sixth and set the stage for Gladding. Facing a 2-1 count, Gladding blasted a no-doubt homer that



Junior Gracie Gladding's fifth homer of 2022 was her most important one to date - a two-run shot in the bottom of the sixth inning that erased a 2-1 margin vs. defending region champ Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

almost departed the school grounds, striking a vehicle on the backside of the outfield parking lot.

But Union County still wasn't out of the woods with an inning to play, allowing Banks to put the tying run aboard via a one-out error. Burnette took care of the second out when she fanned the No. 9 hitter, bringing the leadoff batter to the plate with a runner at first.

The Leopards slapped Burnette's first offering into shallow centerfield, where a fast-charging Byers laid out for the game-ending diving snag on a sinking line drive.

With the win, Union County mounts a two-game

advantage and secures the tiebreaker over second-place Banks County with five games remaining on the region slate.

"One thing I've noticed about [this year's team] is we've really improved on keeping our energy up in the dug-out," Gladding said about her Union squad that entered 2022 unproven after replacing nine seniors. "That's been really important for us this year because we struggle without it. Even the people who aren't playing, they keep us energized, and that's been [a big part of our success]."

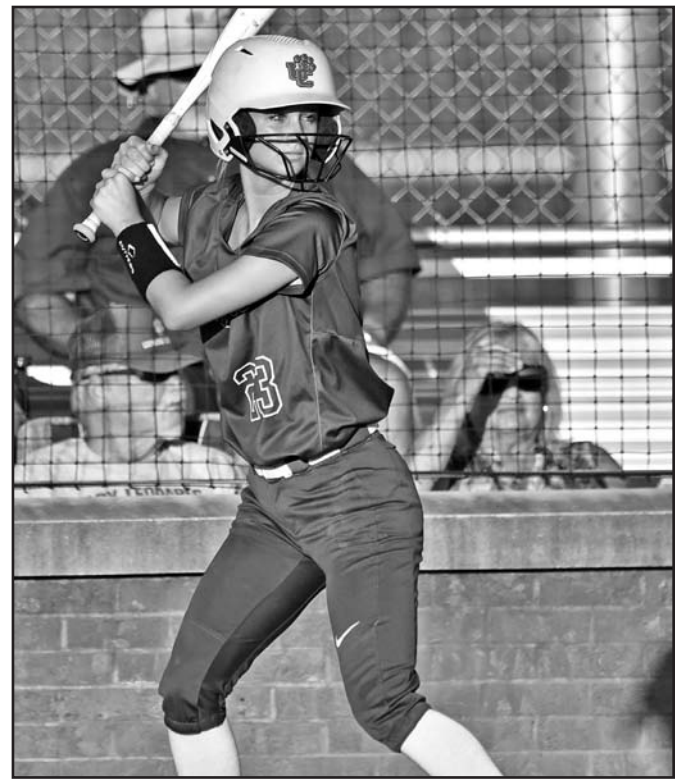
The Lady Panthers escaped with the win despite committing three errors and

getting out-hit 5-4 by an error-free Leopards squad. Gladding struck out looking in her first two plate appearances but finished 1 for 3 with 2 RBIs.

"I was a little down after my first two at-bats, but the most important thing is to stay up for my team," Gladding said. "All I wanted to do during that last at-bat was keep it simple, put the ball in play and move that runner [into scoring position]."

Senior Chloe Potts went 1 for 2, and junior Georgia Patton ended her day 1 for 3. Freshman courtesy runner Peyton Grisham added a run for Union County.

The defensive special-



Junior Katie Byers drove in Union's first run then halted Banks' seventh-inning rally with a game-ending diving catch. Photo/Todd Forrest

ist, Byers, showed off her bat skills during the third inning, breaking the scoreless tie with a double to left field.

Burnette kept the third alive with a two-out walk, and Grisham took her spot on the base paths. Three pitches later, Byers sent a homer when she just a 1-1 pitch off the top of the left-field fence, plating Grisham for a 1-0 lead.

Burnette stranded a one-out single in the fourth before tossing a 1-2-3 fifth. The junior's stat line included five hits over seven innings, two strikeouts, no earned runs and no base on balls during an 83-pitch outing.

"This was a complete

Union performance today," team County head coach Carissa Owenby said after the win. "We did a great job playing as a team and coming together. Of course, Gracie came up big for us and Sierra did a great job pitching. You can't ask for anything more."

Union County visits East Jackson on Tuesday after thumping the Eagles 15-0 on Sept. 13. White County makes a stop in Blairsville for a non-region Wednesday contest ahead of the Lady Panthers' trip to Region 8-AA's third-place Providence Christian on Thursday.

Senior Night photos on Page 3B.

XC: Hunter, Union girls second at Murphy

Union guys take fourth; Gregory comes in seventh

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Murphy, NC - The Union County ladies placed second and the men finished fourth at Murphy, North Carolina's Bulldog Meet on Saturday, Sept. 24.

Freshman Lola Hunter came in second with a time of 20 minutes, 18 seconds, finishing five seconds back of Swain County, NC senior Amaya Hicks. Junior Ellie Adams placed seventh with a time of 22:52 as Union County's 56 team points weren't enough to catch Swain County (23).

Sophomore Lydia Wagner came in 13th at 23:34, senior Ashley Shipes was 20th at 24:14 and sophomore Katie Payne's time of 24:17 was good enough for 21st.

Sophomore Noel Hyatt placed 24th, crossing the finish line at 24:52, junior Natalie Payne was 30th at 25:30 and sophomore Hannah Kazmierzak came in 36th at 26:33.

Senior Italia Salazar finished 37th at 26:47, the 39th spot went to freshman Avery Hussion with a time of 27:50 and freshman Averie Tanner placed 41st at 28:08.

Freshman Sara Patterson was 46th at 29:22, junior Hailey Young placed 48th at 30:00 and freshman Jolie Schmitt was 49th at 30:02. Freshman Abbygail Barrett took home 51st with a time of 30:35.



L-R: Sophomores Hannah Kazmierzak and Noel Hyatt. The Union County ladies placed four runners in the top-20 at Murphy on Saturday. Photo/Todd Forrest

Seventh-place junior Benton Gregory led the men with a time of 18:20. Junior Wes Seiler was 15th at 18:55, junior Zander Rotko placed 16th with a time of 18:58 and junior Anderson Clouse finished 35th at 20:37.

Freshman Ty Hogsted took home 36th, crossing the

line at 20:40. Senior Ethan Rouse placed 43rd at 21:09, Alec Wilder was 48th at 21:34 and sophomore Logan Duckworth came in 58th with a time of 22:16.

Junior Ethan Hill placed 62nd at 22:33; freshman Thomas Gary was 64th at 22:38; junior Luke McPherson

came in 75th at 23:19; freshman Matthew Sisenstein was 84th at 26:24 and senior Jackson Pirie finished 88th at 28:03.

Union will visit Towns County on Thursday ahead of White County's Mountain Invitational on Oct. 4.

UCHS cheer squad performs at Sanford Stadium's Spirit Day

Support the Spandex' serves up Friday night fun at UCHS



The Union County football cheerleaders were among the local squads invited to Sanford Stadium on Saturday to perform during halftime of Georgia's 39-22 victory over Kent State. Photo/UCHS

'Support the Spandex' serves up Friday night fun at UCHS



L-R: The team of Chris Robbins, Curtis Dyer, Corey Garrett, Tim Brown, Keaton Dyer, Zach Odom and Tiffany Rouse emerged from bracket play during Friday's 'Support the Spandex' volleyball fundraising tournament. In the main event, the finalists were presented with the daunting task of facing the UCHS volleyball team. Photo/submitted

Volleyball: Union back on track with wins over East Jackson, Banks

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Union County volleyball bounced back from a rocky start to 2022 with a pair of region wins over East Jackson and Banks County at home on Tuesday, Sept. 20.

The Panthers (13-15, 2-3) opened last week's region tri-match with a convincing 2-0 victory over East Jackson, dropping the Eagles 25-16 and 25-11 in straight sets.

In the first set, Union grabbed a 4-0 lead behind a pair of kills from senior Sofia Swartz and a Saylor Noe ace. East Jackson stormed back to knot the score at 7-7 when Noe and fellow senior Kaylee Ashcraft sparked four straight points.

A kill by Noe extended Union's advantage to 16-10 and 20-13, and later, a Swartz block built a 24-16 lead ahead of game point.

A pair of Noe aces, plus kills from Swartz and Ashcraft, helped the Panthers build an early 10-3 margin in set two. Following a kill by sophomore Megan Brown that halted an East Jackson spurt at 11-7, five Ashcraft aces put Union in control at 20-8.

Leading 21-10, Swartz recorded two kills down the stretch to secure the match. The senior finished with a team-high 10 kills.

Noe recorded eight kills, eight assists and three aces. Ashcraft had six aces, Brown added an ace and Lily Brookshire notched seven assists.

Union County edged Banks County 2-1 in the night-cap, taking the third and deciding set by a score of 15-11. The Panthers also took the first set 25-21 before dropping the second, 26-24.

The Panthers responded from set-one deficits of 14-9 and 16-13, evening the score at 18-18, when a Swartz kill moved Union out front.

Brookshire and Noe helped guide the Panthers to advantages of 21-17 and 24-22 in set two. However, Union



Saylor Noe's eight assists led the way vs. East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest



After an 0-3 start in region play, the Panthers and first-year head coach Megan Brown are back in the thick of the 8-AA playoff race. Photo/Todd Forrest

County eventually surrendered four straight points in the 26-24 loss.

Union led 11-5 in set three when Banks narrowed the margin to 11-9. With her squad on top 14-11, Brookshire's kill notched the match point to complete the home sweep.

Ashcraft led the way with 11 kills and five aces vs. Banks. Noe recorded a team-high 12 assists to go with 10 kills and three aces.

Swartz ended with five kills, Brown had three and Brookshire added two kills and nine assists.

In non-region action, Union County downed Andrews, North Carolina at home by a 3-1 final on Monday, Sept. 19.

Union County visits Fellowship Christian on Tuesday for a tri-match with Providence Christian.

The Panthers head back on the road Thursday to face East Jackson and Athens Academy.

Athens Academy and Providence are both undefeated in 8-AA, but Union, Banks County and Fellowship Christian remain in contention for third place.



Senior Kaylee Ashcraft ended the day with six aces vs. East Jackson and five against Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Sofia Swartz comes through at the net during the latter stages of the opening set vs. East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union County Softball Senior Night photos - Sept. 15



Senior Jaycee Seabolt with family.



Senior Chloe Potts with family.



Senior Caroline Karnes with family.



UCLS Softball Senior Night photos by Todd Forrest

Local Racing Report: Tri-County

By Blake Lynch
North Georgia News
Racing Reporter

Brasstown, NC - On September 22, Tri-County Racetrack hosted the first annual Russell Thomas Memorial Race featuring a \$5,700 Super Late winner's purse. The event was held in honor of Thomas, who raced locally from 1992-2008.

FWD: No. J32 Shannon Jones took home another win. Coming in second was No. 11 Kane Walls. No. J3 Josh Dease was third. No. F3 John Fulford placed fourth. No. 32 Jim Exum took home fifth place.

B Main: No. 3L Mark Ledford picked up the win. No. 3 Floyd Self was second. No. 117 Ronnie Wren was third. No. 28 Roy Hardman was fourth and No. 30 Josh Wooten was fifth.

Street Stock: No. 14 Charles Devine took home the victory. No. 95 Alex Vance was second. No. 21 Troy Turner was third. No. 73 CB McKinn came in fourth. No. J 69 Jim Weller finished in fifth place.

A Main: The checkered flag went to No. 44 Bobby Elkins. No. 100 Copper Twiggs came in second place. No. 50 Charles Devine was third. No. 117 Dylan Beaver was fourth and

No. 03 Dante Curtis rounded out the top five.

Super Late: No. F1 Payton Freeman took home the win. No. 8 David Payne was second. No. 22 Will Roland was third. No. 00 Shawn Chastain was fourth. No. 27 Joe Denby finished fifth.

Open Wheel Mod: Taking home another win was No. 32 Michael Barrett. No. 108 Chuck Southard was second. No. 100 Clayton Turner was third. No. 95c Stevie Clark was fourth. No. 25 Roger Mealey was fifth.

Come out for the final race of the season on October 6 - The Tarheel 50.