

UCMS Cross Country shows improvement despite abbreviated season

By Todd Forrest
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Union County Middle School wrapped up its 2020 season at Meeks Park with a second-place finish at the girls' region meet and a sixth-place finish from the guys.

In the girls' race, seventh-grader Lola Hunter led Union County with a seventh-place finish, while eighth-grader Noel Hyatt came in eighth place out of nearly 180 runners.

The five-race regular season got underway at Meeks Park, with the girls taking home the top spot. Later, they would place three runners in the top-10 at eventual region champ Fannin County before recording another victory at Towns County.

"[The girls] battled back and forth with Fannin all year," coach Meg McCarter said. "All of our races were very close and they were the only team that beat us all season."

According to McCarter, the UCMS girls featured several eighth-graders that could contribute to an already-young Union County High School squad in 2021. Meanwhile, the middle school guys will return several vital runners next season from a young team.

"The boys were pretty young but the girls team will



The Union County Middle School Cross Country team featured 33 runners this fall from grades 6-8. Cross Country is the only sport at UCMS open to sixth graders.

have quite a few going into ninth grade," she said. "With the exception of Lola [Hunter], all of our top runners will be moving up. We're excited about them moving up to high school and we wish them the best. We know they'll help build our high school program and [UCHS coach Paige Dyer]

is already looking forward to having them move up too."

Under the direction of coaches John McCrummen and McCarter, UCMS fielded 33 runners between sixth and eighth grade with official practice getting underway in late-July.

"We started a little later

than usual because of COVID, and it was definitely a challenge this season with 33 runners since we had to take temperatures and socially distance at practice," McCarter said. "We would meet at the pavilion at Meeks Park, so if there was a threat of rain we usually had to cancel because we couldn't

have everyone gathered under the pavilion at one time and we were unable to spread out.

"I know we didn't have as many races as usual, but we want to thank all the kids and parents for working with us through the COVID issues that we had to face during the season. All of our boys and

girls runners saw improved times over the season, and their perseverance was just amazing."

Union's region consists of Clear Creek, Dawson County, Fannin County, Lumpkin County, Pickens, White County and Woody Gap.

Football: Jonah Daniel 'probable' as Panthers open region play at Banks

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Union County has not taken the field on a Friday night since the Oct. 2 Homecoming victory over Pickens.

As a result, coach Brian Allison's Panthers have used the ensuing three weeks to heal up and prepare for Region 8-AA competition beginning Friday with a trip to Banks County.

While the entire Panthers team and coaching staff are anxious to hit the field later this week, no one is more thrilled than senior running back/linebacker Jonah Daniel.

The all-region back suffered an ankle injury early in the third quarter of Union's season-opening loss to Fannin County on Sept. 4. And according to Coach Allison, there is a very good chance that the 1,000-yard rusher could receive a couple snaps at Banks County.

"Jonah is out of the [walking] boot and running, and I would like to think it's probable that he'll get a few plays on Friday," Allison said. "We'll need to wait and see where he's at this week, but it's very possible that he could see the field at Banks."

The Leopards, meanwhile, enter this week's Region 8-AA opener with a 1-5 record. The lone win was a 37-0 victory over a struggling Lumpkin County team that was followed by 49-13 loss at Fannin County.



Having senior Jonah Daniel (24) lead his teammates onto the field Friday night would provide the Panthers with a huge boost. Photo/Todd Forrest

Seven turnovers loomed large in Banks' loss in Blue Ridge as the Rebels blew open a 14-6 halftime advantage with a 35-point third frame.

According to Coach Allison, Banks is still a run-first Wing-T offense, but this year's squad will throw in a spread-look to keep defenses off balance.

"[Banks] will still use the Wing-T but they like to go into a little more spread," he said. "I'd say they're probably 50/50 between shotgun spread and Wing-T, but I think we match up pretty well with them."

Banks is also without its starting QB, who hasn't seen the field since suffering an injury vs Lumpkin on Sept. 25.

"They still have a running back who runs extremely hard so, once again, we're going to have to focus on stopping the run," Allison said. "The quarterback that's come in [off the bench] throws the ball pretty well so he could present a challenge, but overall, I think we matchup well on both sides of the ball."

Despite Fannin's 49-point performance, Banks' defense did

a nice job of keeping the Rebels' offense in check - limiting them to just 289 total yards.

In Union's loss to Fannin, the Panthers surrendered 414 yards of total offense and 26 first downs.

"[Banks' defense] is pretty physical up-front but they play a lot of guys both ways so that might give us a bit of an advantage. Once again, I think our offense matches up pretty good with their defense."

Another common opponent between the Panthers and Leopards is Commerce, who

traveled to Banks one week before hosting Union County.

Like its other losses, Banks allowed points in spurts, falling into a 20-0 hole before responding with 12-unanswered. Trailing 20-12, the Leopards gave up 21 straight before eventually falling 41-18.

Two weeks later, Banks blew a 16-0 fourth-quarter lead at home to East Jackson before missing an extra point in overtime to succumb 23-22.

Union County has won four straight over the Leopards dating back to 2016. Overall,

the Panthers lead the series 23-18 (8-5 under Allison) with their last defeat coming in 2011. However, in contests played at Banks County, the Panthers are 10-10 all-time, but have dropped 8 of the last 13 despite coming away victorious in each of their last two trips to Homer (2016 and 2019).

Between 2002-2007, Union went 2-4 vs. Banks County while Allison was at Winder-Barrow. In Allison's first stint at UCHS, he posted a 4-2 mark against the Leopards between 1996-2001.

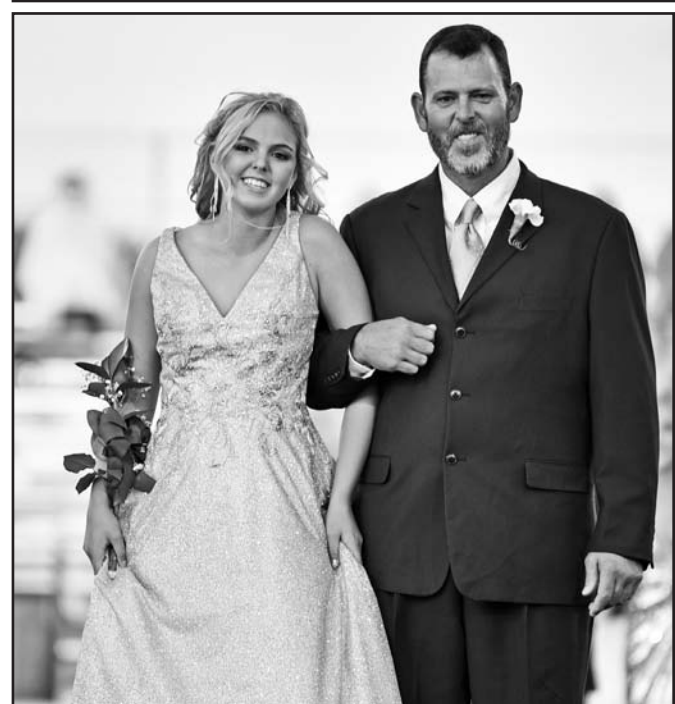
"We've had two very good weeks of practice and we've almost had to treat it like the preseason," Allison said regarding consecutive off weeks. "Starting this week, we have a five-week regular season push and the guys have had a tremendous attitude, we've been able to correct some things and we're in pretty good shape health-wise."

Kickoff is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. on Friday at Banks County High School in Homer.

Learn to play Pickleball

Learn to play Pickleball: Beginner's Lessons every Saturday, 10 AM (weather permitting). No charge and all equipment provided. Courts are located behind the Health Department. For more information contact: blairsvillepickleball@gmail.com.

Photos: Union County High School Homecoming festivities 2020



Photos - Clockwise: The Homecoming Court, Runner-Up Allie Cox and Queen Katie Baumeister, Junior Runner-Up Tori Tracy, Sophomore Runner-Up Micana Wooten, Freshman Runner-Up Georgia Patton. Photos/Todd Forrest