

Sports

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Union County High School introduces new softball coach

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New head softball coach Stephen Mitchell met with Lady Panther players for the first time during a visit to Union County High School on Friday morning. Mitchell, a 1995 graduate of Bowdon High School, has coached the Lady Red Devil softball program in some capacity for 11 years, serving as head coach for the past two seasons.

When asked what it was about UCHS that lured him away from his hometown - the school, its softball program, and the area topped the list.

"It's all of those things," he said. "Bowdon is a good place. It's a good place to put your roots down. My wife and I have always thought about leaving and there aren't many places that we would have left for, but when the opportunity came about, we did our research. Obviously the scenery, the school, the area, and the fact that we've crossed paths several times sharing information. She's got a good knowledge of the game and I know I'm stepping into a good situation."

"During the interview process, we met with Mr. (C.T.) Husision, Coach (Brian) Allison, and Coach (Mandy) Hunter, and you just kind of know when you're go-



New Union County Softball Coach Stephen Mitchell (right) with Heather (left) and Sam (middle). Photo/Todd Forrest

ing to be around good people." Mitchell's two seasons as head coach were almost carbon copies of one another - winning 25 games while reaching the Elite 8 in Columbus.

He led Bowdon to a 25-8 record in 2017 while guiding the Lady Red Devils to an 11-4 mark in Region 6-A, where they finished second to powerhouse Gordon Lee, who went on to win its third consecutive state title and its seventh in eight years. Bowdon's 2017 season also featured a 14-game winning streak to go with

an undefeated home record of 13-0 - including the postseason.

After sweeping Telfair County at home in Class A Public Sweet 16, Bowdon knocked off Emanuel County in the opening game at Columbus before dropping two-straight to Mt. Zion and Trion.

Mitchell, who stresses pitching and defense, guided Bowdon to 10 shutout victories last season and plans on instilling that same philosophy at UCHS this summer and fall.

Aside from winning, Mitchell's other priority is keeping the game enjoyable for his players.

Stephen Mitchell - Bowdon Coaching History

2017	Head Coach	25-8	State Elite 8
2016	Head Coach	25-10	State Elite 8
2015	Asst. Coach	12-19	State 1st Rd
2014	Asst. Coach	18-15	State 2nd Rd
2013	Asst. Coach	17-14	State 1st Rd
2012	Asst. Coach	20-9	State 1st Rd
2011	Asst. Coach	N/A	State 2nd Rd
2010	Asst. Coach	N/A	State 1st Rd
2009	Asst. Coach	N/A	DNQ
2008	Asst. Coach	N/A	N/A
2007	Asst. Coach	N/A	N/A

ell's other priority is keeping the game enjoyable for his players.

"I'm a pitching and defense guy first," he said. "Of course, I like to score runs too but my emphasis is going to be pitching and defense because you can't win without that."

"I like to have a good time. We're in a society now that puts so much emphasis on sports that the added pressure often hurts the situation. But we're going to have fun. That's one of the key elements of my program."

In 2016, Mitchell's first

season at the helm, the Lady Red Devils boasted a 25-10 record, a second-place finish in Region 6-A, and an Elite 8 appearance. After breezing through the first two rounds of state -- outscoring the opposition 33-7 in four wins -- Bowdon lost 3-2 to Georgia Military in nine innings, then lost another nailbiter, 2-1 to Trion to end their 2016 campaign.

Prior to Mitchell taking charge, Bowdon was 12-19 with two losses at Union County in the first round of state in 2015.

They went 18-15 in 2014

while reaching the Class AA Sweet 16 where they were eliminated by Union County's Region 8-AA nemesis Social Circle.

The Lady Red Devils were 17-15 in 2013 - losing to Dade County in the first round of state.

"This past week has been a whirlwind between telling some players goodbye and saying hello to others," Mitchell said. "We're also in the process of setting up a move up here. It's been busy but we're super excited."

"I'm going to lay out a tentative schedule for the summer. Then again, with a small school, you have to share your athletes (with other sports) and I'm not sure what basketball, soccer, and other programs do during the summer. We're going to plan on doing some workouts and some pitching and catching in June. Then after the July 4th dead week we're going to go wide open with practices, games, and things like that."

NOTES: Union County will return to Class AA as members of Region 8-AA in 2018 after spending the past two seasons in Class AAA as members of Region 7-AAA.

Mitchell and his wife Heather have two children: Bailey (22) and Sam (2).

At Bowdon, Mitchell has been an assistant baseball, football, and softball coach. He also served as the head coach of the baseball team.

Like Stewart, he is also a graduate of West Georgia.

Baseball: Dawson takes two from Union during three-game slug-fest

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The Panthers dropped two of three to Dawson County last week after Mother Nature pushed game one of the series back to Thursday.

Originally scheduled for Monday in Dawsonville, game one took place Thursday in Blairsville. And after taking three extra days to get underway, game one didn't want to end.

Seven innings weren't enough. Neither was eight.

Not even a nine-inning major league baseball game could break the tie.

After 11 innings, 41 hits, and 35 runs, the Tigers finally came out on top by the football-esque score of 21-14 in a matchup that saw Dawson County score 20 of its 21 runs with two outs.

Panthers 14, Dawson County 21 (Game One) - Trailing 3-1 entering the bottom of the second, Union County poured in five runs during the second and five more in the third to open up an 11-5 lead.

The Tigers added two in the fourth but the Panthers responded with two of their own to hold a 13-7 advantage through four innings.

Dawson picked up a run in the fifth and three runs in the sixth to pull within 13-11 but Union County tacked on an insurance run in its half of the inning to take a 14-11 lead into the seventh.

Junior Coleson Daniel allowed a walk and a hit-by-pitch but kept the Tigers off the board by inducing a pop-out and a fly-out for a two-on, two-out situation with his team still leading by three.

Senior RJ Banton replaced Daniel and issued a five-pitch walk to the 9-hole hitter, bringing Ole Miss commit Hudson Sapp to the plate with the tying run at first.

Sapp would deliver, sending a 3-1 pitch deep into the night and off the right-center-field fence, clearing the bases and tying the game with a 3-run triple.

Union would intentionally walk, North Greenville commit Palmer Sapp, then another free pass loaded the bases before Banton got out of trouble with a groundout to second.

In the Panthers' half of the seventh, Chayton Schafer drew a leadoff walk and Logan Dyer reached on another free pass with one down.

With the winning run at second and one down, Dawson County would send the game into the eighth inning with a strikeout and a groundout to short.

Banton retired the Tigers in-order after an error put the leadoff man aboard.

With another opportunity to win it in the bottom of the



Senior RJ Banton drove in 5 runs in game one while pitching 4.2 innings in the Panthers 11-inning loss. Photo/Todd Forrest

eighth, Union County junior Hunter Kelley lined an opposite-field single to open the inning but two quick outs followed via strikeout and a fielder's choice.

Senior Del Ruff reached on a two-out walk, moving Jonathan Everett into scoring position, but a pop-up ended the inning still tied at 14-14.

Hunter Sapp singled in the ninth but was thrown out trying to steal second. Meanwhile, Banton drew a two-out walk in the bottom of the ninth but was stranded at first.

A leadoff single was wasted in Dawson's half of the tenth but Union County went down 1-2-3 in the bottom half of the inning.

The Tigers finally blew things open in the 11th with seven runs - all coming with two outs.

With two down, the Panthers intentionally walked Hunter Sapp to load the bases but Palmer Sapp made them pay with an RBI single to left.

Union County then shot themselves in the foot when Banton induced a grounder to short but the throw bounced off the glove of the first baseman, bringing in two more runs.

After a hit-by-pitch loaded the bases, four straight Dawson County singles led to four more runs and a 21-14 score.

The Panthers went down quietly in the bottom of the 11th - awarding game one to the visitors.

Union County slugged 16 hits with five going for extra bases but it wasn't enough to keep pace with the Tigers' 25 hits - three for extra bases.

Banton led the Panthers offense with 5 RBIs, two runs, and two doubles during a 3-for-5 day at the plate. Dyer also recorded three hits -- two doubles -- while scoring three times and driving in two during a 3-for-6 performance.

Daniel knocked in three while going 2-of-6 at the plate;

Kelley was 2-for-5 with a triple and 2 RBIs.

Kelley's triple came in the second when Union County grabbed the lead with five runs. Trailing 3-1, Baggett scored Cole Davis on a Tiger error, then Banton put the Panthers ahead with a two-run single - scoring Schafer and Baggett.

After Daniel brought home Dyer with a groundout, Kelly tripled past a diving centerfielder to bring in Banton for a 6-3 lead.

Dawson got back two runs in the third off Panther starter Ean Harkins but Union exploded for five more in the bottom of the inning.

A Davis single, a Pierson Allison walk, and an Alec Scott bunt single loaded the bases for Baggett, who scored Davis with a base hit to right.

A one-out Banton double brought two more runners home, then Daniel followed with an RBI single. Kelley drove in the final run of the inning with a sacrifice fly to center.

Dawson tacked on two runs in the fourth but the Panthers got them back on a two-run double by Dyer in the bottom half of the inning.

A controversial call cost the Union at least one run in the inning when Baggett scored on a Daniel sacrifice fly. After Baggett beat the throw home, Dawson threw back to second base, claiming the runner left early. After they were awarded the out at second, it was also ruled that the out at second (somehow) occurred before Baggett crossed home plate, costing the Panthers a run, and quite possibly the game when the seventh inning ended in a tie. Still leading 13-7 after four innings, Union County appeared to have the game under control and didn't create much fuss over one run.

A pair of two-out singles led to a Tiger run in the fifth, then the Panthers left the bases loaded in their half of the in-



Senior Logan Dyer finished 3-for-6 with two doubles and 2 RBIs in Union County's game one loss. Photo/Todd Forrest

ning. Trailing 13-8 in the sixth, an RBI groundout with one down (Dawson's only run that didn't come with two outs) made it 13-9 before a two-out double pulled the Tigers within a deuce at 13-11.

Back-to-back doubles by Dyer and Banton provided Union an early insurance run in the bottom of the sixth before consecutive walks loaded the bases with nobody out.

With a chance to deliver the knockout blow, the Panthers went down quietly on two strikeouts and a groundout - sending the game into the seventh with a too-close-for-comfort 14-11 lead.

Harkins got the start and lasted 2.2 innings, allowing seven hits, three walks, and five earned runs. Daniel replaced him and went 3.2 innings, giving up nine hits, one walk, and six earned, while fanning two.

Banton closed the game with 4.2 innings of work. He surrendered nine hits, five walks, and eight earned runs with one strikeout.

DAWSONVILLE - Panthers 9, Dawson County 8 (Game Two): After wrapping up game one late Thursday night in Blairsville, the two teams squared off in a doubleheader the following afternoon at DCHS.

The second game would once again go down to the wire with Union County rallying for nine runs in the final three innings to take the one-run victory.

Trailing 3-0, the Panthers scored four in the fifth to grab a 4-3 advantage, only to watch Dawson respond with two in its half of the inning to regain the lead.

The Tigers added a run in the sixth to extend its lead to 6-4 heading into the seventh.

Banton led off the inning with a double to right, then Daniel singled up the middle

to put two in scoring position for Kelley, who drove in the pinch runner Allison with a groundout.

After a strikeout resulted in the second out, Davis was hit by a pitch, putting the go-ahead run on first.

Harkins stepped to the plate and singled to left on the first pitch he saw - tying the game when pinch runner John Mancuso scored from second.

Tied at 6-6, Alec Scott gave Union the lead with a base hit to center - scoring Davis. Schafer followed with a double to left that brought home Harkins and Scott and spotted the Panthers another three-run lead with three outs left.

With Baggett taking the mound for the Panthers, Hunter Sapp drew a walk and Palmer Sapp was plunked by a 2-1 pitch. A groundout to Dyer at second moved the runners to second and third. Another walk loaded the bases before a base hit pulled the Tigers within a run at 9-8 with only one down.

The next batter would foul out to the catcher Scott and Baggett picked up his first save of the year with a tapper back to the mound for the third out.

Jackson Colwell got the win after working a scoreless sixth inning. Davis started for the Panthers and tossed five innings while scattering six hits and giving up six runs but only two earned.

Harkins finished 3-for-4 at the plate with two runs, a double, and the game-tying RBI. Scott was 2-for-4 with two runs and 2 RBIs - including the go-ahead RBI in the seventh.

Schafer went 2-for-3 with a two-run double in the seventh and 3 RBIs. Daniel also finished with a two-hit game, going 2-for-4 with a double and an RBI. Banton would go 1-for-5 with a double and an RBI.

Mancuso and Allison scored two runs each as courtesy/pinch runners.

Panthers 5, Dawson County 15 - The Tigers exploded for 10 runs in the sixth inning to blow open a 5-5 game after Union County stormed back from down 5-0 with four in the fourth and one in the sixth.

The Tigers used a two-out, bases-loaded triple to grab an early 4-0 lead of Union starter, sophomore Cayden Rich.

Jackson Colwell replaced Rich in the fourth and yielded an RBI groundout that spotted Dawson a 5-0 advantage.

The Panthers answered with four in the fifth when Baggett put Union on the board with a bases-loaded walk. Banton followed suit with a one-out, RBI walk.

Allison made it a 5-3 game with a sacrifice fly and Everett scored Baggett on an error by shortstop Palmer Sapp.

Jackson Colwell issued consecutive walks to open the inning, bringing Everett to the hill. Following a strikeout and a pop-out, the Panthers escaped the fifth when Dawson County was caught stealing for the third out.

Union tied it up in the sixth with a Davis double, a Mancuso sacrifice bunt and a Baggett sacrifice fly.

In the bottom of the sixth, the Tigers scored six runs before the Panthers recorded an out. Dawson would tack on three more before the second out. They would end the game via mercy rule with a two-out, RBI single to extend the margin to 10 runs.

Dyer, Kelley, Ruff, Davis, and Jackson Colwell each accounted for one of Union County's five hits. Baggett drove in two, Banton one, and Allison one.

Davis scored twice while Baggett, Ruff, and Jackson Colwell scored once.

Looking ahead - Up next is a three-game series with defending state champ North Hall, who is also undefeated in region play.

The Trojans are coming off a three-game sweep of Fannin County that required eight innings for the win in the opener.

Prior to Fannin, North Hall swept Lumpkin County by a combined three-game total of 31-3. As for Lumpkin, they already own a three-game sweep over the Panthers by a combined score of 29-14.

The North Hall series got underway Monday with the Trojans visiting Blairsville. The second game will be Wednesday in Clermont at 5:55 p.m. and the third game will be back in Blairsville, also at 5:55 p.m.

Next Monday, Apr. 2, the Panthers will host Murphy, NC at 5 p.m. before returning to region play on Tuesday, Apr. 3 when GAC comes to town for a 5:55 p.m. first pitch.

Baseball season stats available on page 5B.