

Sports

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Class AA No. 1 Jefferson escapes Union after 10 brutal innings

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Spring is in the air and that can only mean one thing, high school baseball's regular season is coming down the home stretch.

In a game that would decide the Region Championship, Union County and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* top-ranked Jefferson Dragons (18-2, 10-0) gave each other all they could handle, and then some, in front of an emotionally charged Blairsville crowd.

Each team struck early for a run before the pitching took over and the game remained tied at 1-1 going into extra innings. Eventually Jefferson put up seven runs in the 10th inning, taking an 8-1 victory.

Looking at the final score, one would think the game was one-sided, but it was anything but. These same two teams took 11 innings to reach a decision last month, and the second contest wasn't much different.

With the largest Panther crowd of 2013 in attendance, to say the game had a playoff-type atmosphere would be a radical understatement. Play after play and pitch after pitch, had both sides holding their collective breaths as each pitching staff squared off like two prize fighters going toe-to-toe in the center of the ring.

A full count, bases loaded strikeout, or a perfectly executed pick off play by Union junior Calvin Duckworth would be followed by a bare-handed, off-balance scoop-and-throw by Jefferson shortstop and University of Georgia commit Max Ford.

That was what it took for the Dragons to overcome a perfect strike by Panther centerfielder Jared Croskey to cut down a runner at the plate. Or a diving underhanded toss by Union pitcher Lane Everett to get a force out at the plate.

"Playoff atmosphere indeed," Union Head Coach Brandon Bradburn said. "That will be good for us later on in the season. The thing that impressed me the most about our guys was our mental toughness. We had several situations where they could have scored earlier in the game, but we pitched around them and played pretty good defense to keep them off the board."

After Jefferson came through with a two-out RBI single in the first inning, Wes Aulet left his mark in the bottom half of the first.

Literally. The Panther senior countered the Dragons' two-out hit with one of his own, blasting a hanging curve ball over the



Brothers in arms: With Old Glory waving in the background, both teams take a moment to pray following a 10-inning clash that neither squad deserved to lose. Union County baseball photos by Todd Forrest



Panthers celebrate at home plate after Wes Aulet goes deep in the first inning against Jefferson.

left-field fence, putting a dent in the scoreboard.

Following an impressive performance in the first meeting with Jefferson, Everett got the ball to start the game. After giving up a run off four singles in the first, the junior settled down and held the Dragons scoreless, until he was pulled in the sixth.

"I decided to start Lane again because of his dominance in game one against Jefferson," Bradburn said. "I was concerned about the pitch counts because they both (Everett and Duckworth) threw 80-plus

pitches four days earlier. Its hard to game plan for pitching when you know the game is going to go extra innings and be a nail biter. I had already made the decision after the first time we played Jefferson, so I kept Lane's pitch count lower against Social Circle."

A lead off single and a one-out walk was the story line for Everett in the second, until a base running blunder handed the Panthers another out. With two on and two out, Everett got a grounder to short to end the inning.

The Panthers loaded the

bases in the bottom of the second after freshman Lance Rich singled, sophomore Jackson Burks drew a free pass, and with two outs, Zach Odom was intentionally walked. Unfortunately, Duckworth ripped a shot into center field, directly at the Dragon outfielder to end the inning.

The third inning saw Jefferson load the bases with one out but a swinging bunt was hit towards Everett who charged, scooped it up and tossed it to the plate for the force. The Panther hurler then got a fly out to Croskey.



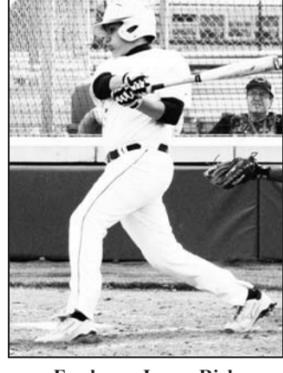
The Union County pitching staff was dominant for 9 innings. Junior Lane Everett (left) gave way to Calvin Duckworth (middle) in the sixth. Senior Cooper Patton (right) came through with a clutch pinch hit single in the bottom of the sixth inning. Photos by Todd Forrest



Senior first baseman Wes Aulet goes deep in the first inning.



Senior Cooper Patton



Freshman Lance Rich

Runners left on base continued to be theme for both offenses as each team left two stranded in their next at bat.

It only took 10 pitches for Everett to put the Dragons away in order in the fifth, but Union was unable to capitalize, leaving the bases loaded in the bottom half of the inning.

A lead off walk in the sixth forced Bradburn's hand, and the skipper brought in Duckworth, who walked the first two batters he faced. Luckily, he picked off a runner at first before his third pitch of the game.

With one out, the Dragons laid down a sacrifice bunt, moving two into scoring position, but a grounder to Odom derailed the Dragons' scoring hopes and kept the game tied at

1-1 in the middle of the sixth.

Cooper Patton singled to left with one out and Croskey's bunt moved him to second but once again, Union was unable to get a two-out hit with runners in scoring position.

As the seventh inning approached, the tension began to build, but neither team buckled under the pressure.

"Duck" got Andy Nicholas to fly out to left, then allowed a one-out single. Ford flew out to Bentley, who made a nice running catch, for out number two and setting the stage for some late inning drama.

With one on and two outs, Union was in prime position to get off the field and back to the plate.

Not quite. That would be too easy.

"Duck" gave up two more walks, loading the bases for the number nine spot in the Dragon lineup.

Strike looking, ball, ball, strike swinging, and a ball put Duckworth in quite a predicament - full count, bases loaded, and two outs.

The 3-2 pitch was fouled back, setting up another 3-2 pitch. But this time, Duckworth blew the high heat past senior Tyler Cole for out number three, igniting the Panther crowd.

With one-out in the bottom of the seventh, Duckworth was hit in the head by a 1-1 fastball. Courtesy runner Garrett Nix.

See *Baseball*, Page 13A

Panther soccer drops third straight, but remain in State playoff contention

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Gainesville - After a scoreless tie at halftime, Riverside Military Academy scored a goal midway through the second half and then tacked on two more late to hand Union County it's second straight Region 8-AA defeat and third overall.

We played them even the first half," Union County Head Coach Tim Hunter said. "They were very athletic and had one of the strongest high school keepers that I have seen in some time. He really changed the whole dynamic of the game. With our team's style and formation it is very important for us to be playing even or with a lead.

"TJ (Smith) had a chance for us to take the lead on a counterattack where he got a one-on-one opportunity with the keeper. He made a great shot with the keeper diving the opposite direction. The keeper threw his back foot up and made a kick save. That was a huge play for them and ultimately had we made that shot it might have changed the dynamic of the game. TJ made a great play, it was no fault of his, the keeper just made a tremendous save."

After Riverside took the lead, Union County freshman keeper Justin Eigel made some spectacular saves himself but Riverside continued it's relentless attack and eventually added two late goals to put the Panthers away.



Freshman keeper Justin Eigel

were able to keep a lot of pressure on us," Hunter said. "As I said, they were fast and athletic at every spot. They scored the first goal around midway through the second half. They then hit a shot that was an opposite foot swerve. Unfortunately that is one of those shots you just have to take your hat off to. They scored again on a shot that we misplayed at the back. But they had put several shots on goal and Justin Eigel really stepped up after that and blocked a penalty kick and made an additional save."

With one Region 8-AA game left to play, Union is still well within the playoff picture as they host Jefferson on Friday.

"They are a quality team and they have a lot of speed and athleticism at every spot," Hunter said. "Unfortunately, Rabun lost Friday night too, so a win would have put us back in title contention. Now it forces almost a must-win situation vs Jefferson on Friday night to get to advance to the State Tournament.

The Panther JV squad fell 2-1 at Riverside on Friday.

"We put a lot of shots on goal and as a team we passed the ball very well," Hunter said. "Brett Dietz scored his first goal of the season and the first of his career as he is a first-time soccer player. He also had one shot that hit off the post or he would have had a second goal. Cristian Garcia played very well in midfield for us and made a lot of hustle plays. Matthew Van Pelt also played very well on defense for us and he has improved a great deal all season long. I'm ultimately very happy with our performance despite the loss in the JV game. These kids have done so much to get better and they really have stepped up and are making the transition to be quality varsity players next year."

Both varsity squads will be back in action on Tuesday as the host Class AAAA's Lumpkin County at 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. for Senior Night.

The Lady Panthers can still host a State Playoff game, while the Panthers will be going on the road, if they make it into the post-season.

"There is no possible way to host a state playoff for the guys," Hunter said. "The girls still have an opportunity if they beat Jefferson. "First we have to worry about Lumpkin, which is a quality AAAA team. But we have to keep our eyes focused on the biggest prize which is Jefferson on Friday."

State Tournament action begins May 2nd for the Lady Panthers.

Post-Jefferson: Union bats remain cold; held to five hits, one run at Hayesville

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Hayesville, NC - Last Thursday, Union County traveled to Hayesville, NC to face the defending Smokey Mountain Conference Champion Yellow Jackets.

Still reeling from a 10-inning affair two days earlier with Jefferson with a Region Championship at stake, the Panthers came out flat and fell behind 6-0 before posting their only run of the contest in the sixth inning.

Senior Jared Croskey started on the mound for the Panthers before giving up a two-out RBI single in the second. Croskey would retire the next hitter on a grounder to shortstop.

Croskey led off the third by reaching on an error but was picked off at first. Cody Davenport would single on the next pitch, but the Jackets got out of the inning by getting a double-play ball.

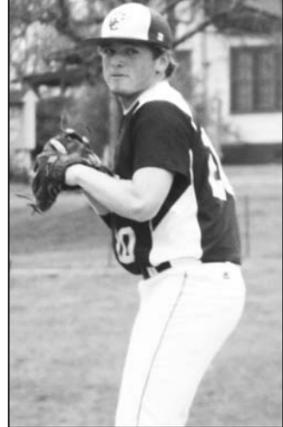
Davenport took the ball in the third inning and allowed an infield single, a walk, and another single to put Union in a 2-0 hole.

Zach Odom struck out swinging to start the fourth, Calvin Duckworth drew a walk, and Wes Aulet was hit by a pitch putting the tying run on first. However, T Bentley would strike out and Lane Everett grounded out to third base to end the threat.

The Yellow Jackets blew



Jared Croskey (left) and Cody Davenport (right) were on the hill against Hayesville. Photos by Todd Forrest



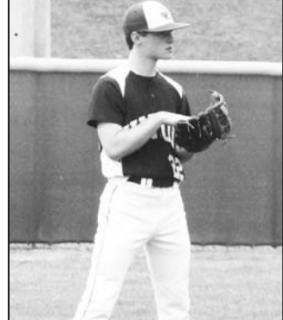
Garrett Nix

things open with four runs in the bottom of the fourth thanks to four singles, a double, and two sacrifice flies.

Sophomore Robert Prunier led off the fifth with a single, but the center fielder's base hit was followed by two strikeouts and a ground out.

Junior left fielder Garrett Nix made a sliding catch into the fence in foul territory for the first out of the bottom of the fifth. Davenport then pitched around a one-out single to keep the Yellow Jackets off the board in the fifth.

Odom began the sixth with an opposite field triple off the base of the right-center field fence. Duckworth then brought him in with a single. Unfortunately that was all Union could muster as Aulet and Bentley popped out and Everett lined out to third.



Davenport settled down and didn't allow a hit in the bottom of the sixth but the Panthers went down in order in the top of the seventh.

After three Region 8-AA contests this week, Union will travel back to North Carolina to take on the Murphy Bulldogs on Thursday, Apr. 25th at 4:30 p.m.