

Sports

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Lady Panthers back-to-back Region 8-AA champs

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Over the last two years, Union County girls soccer has made it look easy.

But this year's Region Championship coronation - a game with an overmatched Washington-Wilkes squad - was delayed by nearly two hours due to the Tigers' bus getting stopped behind a fallen telephone pole that shut down Hwy. 76 in eastern Towns County on Friday afternoon.

When the game finally got underway, the Lady Panthers needed less than 33 minutes to score 10 goals and end the game via mercy-stoppage to secure consecutive Region 8-AA titles on Senior Night in Blairsville.

Senior Rachel Vester stole the show during her final Region home game - scoring four goals, including three during a span of 98 seconds to stretch the lead from 3-0 to 6-0. Vester would later add an assist to make it a 9-0 game.

Junior Braedyn Robbins got the rout underway with an unassisted goal in the second minute, three minutes later she assisted Vester's first goal of the evening.

Freshman Madison Yost, who finished with three goals, scored an unassisted goal in the seventh minute before the Lady Panthers (9-1, 4-0) went on a 10-minute mini-drought that ended with Vester's three-goal barrage in the 17th and 18th minutes.

Yost assisted Vester with 23 minutes left in the first half before senior Ansley Garrison fed Vester for another goal just 26 seconds later. Garrison finished with three assists.

With just over 22 minutes to play in the first, Vester scored an unassisted goal to make it a 6-nil game. Just over a minute later, Garrison blasted a kick by the Wilkes' keeper that was set up by a pass from sophomore Layne Baenninger.

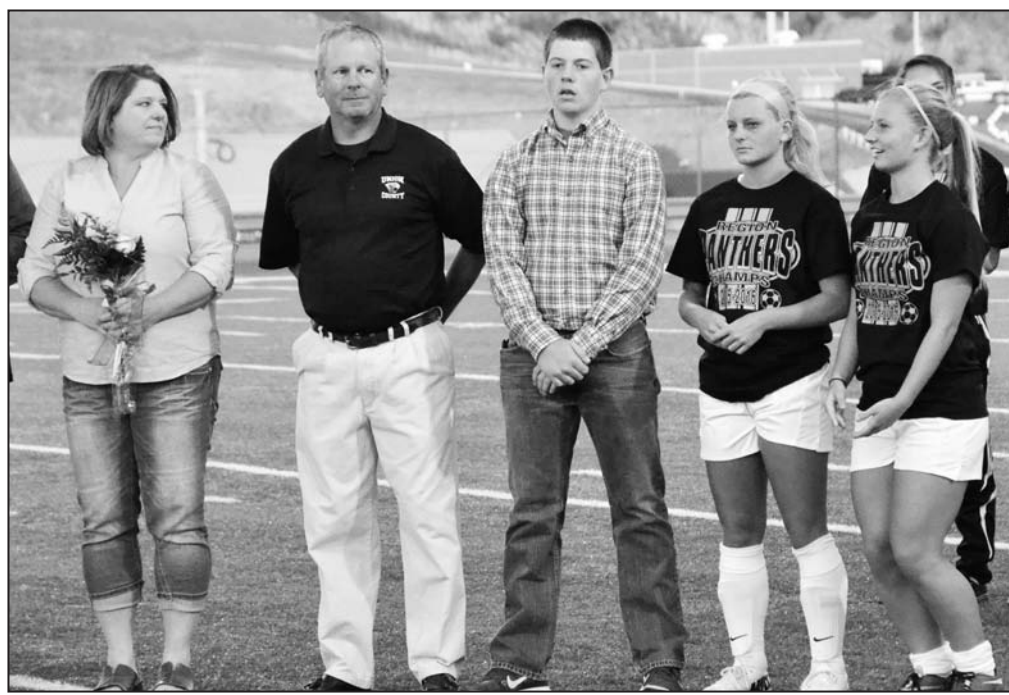
Garrison found Yost for



Senior Rachel Vester with family



Senior Janey Thomas with family.



Senior Ansley Garrison (far right) with family.

Union County Soccer Senior Night photos by Todd Forrest

Union's eighth goal in the 25th minute before Yost struck again three minutes later with the assist going to Garrison and Vester.

The Lady Panthers put Wilkes out of their misery in the 33rd minute with an unassisted goal by freshman Anzly Sherman.

During the win, sophomore goalkeeper Emmi Schakat didn't face a single Lady Tigers' shot attempt in her seventh shutout of the season.

On Tuesday, Garrison and Vester led the Lady Panthers' scoring onslaught with 2 goals and 2 assists each during an 8-0 victory at East Jackson in Commerce.

Union County scored four goals in the first 14 minutes and held a one-sided 7-0 advantage at the intermission.

Robbins and Yost each finished with a goal and an assist while sophomore Brenna Innis and Sherman both chipped in one goal.

Schakat denied the Lady Eagles on a penalty kick to secure the shutout victory.

The following day, Union hosted Rabun Gap and took a

2-0 win following a scoreless first half.

Yost and fellow freshman Maddie Sutton scored the Lady Panthers' goals while Vester included an assist.

This week, Union will visit Class AAA and future Region-foe Lumpkin County on Tuesday.

Thursday will be the Region 8-AA finale when a trip to Oglethorpe County is on the docket for Union soccer.

A rematch with Towns is scheduled for Friday, where the Lady Panthers will be looking to avenge a shutout loss from last month.

Coach of the Year - Union County Lady Panthers Head Coach Tim Hunter was named the Georgia Athletic Coaches Association's (GACA) Region Coach of the Year for the second consecutive season.

The award is the fourth for Hunter who also claimed COY honors in 2000 and 2004.

State Tournament - The Lady Panthers are currently slated to open the Class AA State Tournament on Friday, Apr. 29 when they

host the No. 4 seed from Region 5-AA.

Union will most likely face Bowdon or Chattahoochee County in the opening round.

Bowdon has won a total of three games this season, while Chattahoochee has two wins.

The two regions did meet back on March 18th when Bremen, the No. 1 seed from Region 5-AA lost 2-1 Social Circle, who Union defeated 3-0.

Bremen pummeled Bowdon by a score of 9-0 and Chattahoochee by an 8-0 score.

Lady Panthers 2016 season stats - Goals: Vester 15, Yost 14, Robbins 5, Ansley Garrison and Innis 4. Sherman 2, Sutton and Layne Baenninger 1.

Assists: Vester and Ansley Garrison 7, Baenninger and Yost 6. Joanna Irvin and Robbins 2. Innis, Ellie Garrison, Kaitlyn Gallagher, Sherman 1.

Points: Vester 37, Yost 30, Ansley Garrison 15, Robbins 12, Innis 9 Baenninger 8, Sherman 5, Irvin and Sutton 2. Gallagher and Ellie Garrison 1.

Panthers conclude roller coaster week with Region title

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Union entered this week on the verge of back-to-back region titles, but following consecutive losses to open the week, first place wasn't determined until the final out of the second game at Social Circle on Friday, when the Panthers won via tiebreaker.

With its back against the wall in game two at Social Circle, Union (13-7, 9-3) came out swinging and took a 5-0 advantage in the second inning.

The Redskins got two runs back in the bottom of the third but the Panthers added three more in the fourth and five in the fifth for a 13-3 victory in five innings.

Union receives the No. 1 seed in the Class AA State Playoffs after outscoring Social Circle 15-6 in their two games - which was the first tiebreaker.

On Tuesday, Union allowed only two hits at Rabun, but fell 7-4 after issuing 11 walks, hitting two batters, and committing three errors.

The Panthers led 2-0 after one and 3-1 midway through the fourth but the Wildcats got six runs in the bottom of the fourth - knocking senior ace Joseph Mancuso from the game following his eighth walk of the contest.

In the first game of a doubleheader at Social Circle, the Union lineup was victimized by 16 strikeouts in a 3-2 loss.

The Panthers held a 2-1 advantage with five outs to go but the Redskins strung-together a single-triple-single to take the lead.

The second game saw sophomore RJ Banton blast a 2-run homer in the first inning that kickstarted a floundering Union offense.

Banton finished 2-for-3 with 4 RBIs, a homer, a double, a walk, and a run.

Senior Andrew Brown also drove in four runs, thanks in large part to a 3-run double in the second inning to spot the Panthers a five-run lead.

Sophomores Patrick Baggett and Crawford Colwell also had a big game at the plate with Baggett going 2-for-3 with 2 RBIs, 4 runs, and a walk.

Colwell was 2-for-3 with 3 runs, a walk, and a stolen base.

On the mound, senior Lance Rich recorded his fourth win (4-2) of the year, and more importantly, pitched Union County to its second region title in as many years



Senior Lance Rich celebrates following the third out of Union's region-clinching victory at Social Circle. Photo/submitted

and fourth consecutive top two finish in Region 8-AA.

Rich went the distance, allowing just 2 hits and 3 unearned runs. He struck out five and didn't surrender a walk.

At the plate, Rich doubled and drove in two runs.

Following a gem from Chandler Ball (11 K's) and Davis Smith (5 K's) in game one, the Redskins' pitching staff couldn't find an answer for the Panthers in game two.

Social Circle threw three different pitchers at Union and each one surrendered a minimum of three runs.

Following Banton's blast and Brown's bases clearing double, the Redskins loaded the bases in the third on two Union errors and a hit batter. Rich got the first out on a swing and miss at strike three, then a ground out to third brought in a run. With two outs, Rich induced another grounder to third but not before Social Circle added another run on a passed ball.

In the top of the fourth, Colwell singled and Baggett walked. Then with one out, Rich brought them in with an opposite-field double.

With Ean Harkins replacing Rich on the basepaths, Banton delivered again with a double to make it an 8-2 game.

Rich worked around a hit

batter with one out to escape the bottom of the fourth unscathed and the Panthers loaded the bases with nobody out in the fifth.

Freshman Coleson Daniel was plunked by a 1-1 pitch, senior Will King reached on an error, and Colwell walked on five pitches.

A base hit by Baggett allowed Daniel and King to score, then a Brown bunt scored Colwell.

Baggett scored on a passed ball and Brown scored on a Banton ground out for a 13-2 Union County advantage.

Rich yielded a two-out triple in the bottom half of the fifth that later trimmed the lead to 13-3 on a passed ball. However, Rich ended the inning and the game with a fly out to Brown in left field.

Mancuso doubled in game two, Harkins and Daniel each scored a run, while King scored twice.

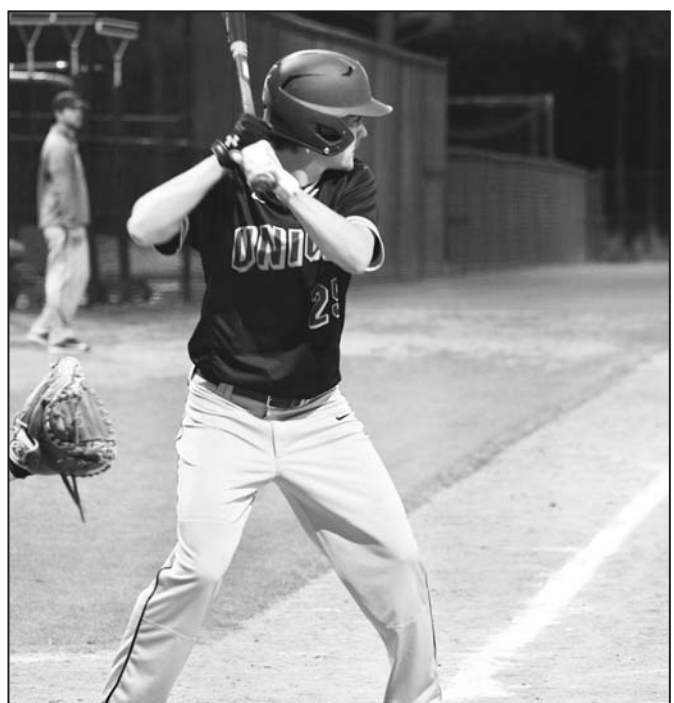
In game one, Mancuso (4-2) fired six innings, scattering six hits, fanning four, and walking two. He also allowed two earned runs in the loss.

The Panthers tacked on a run in the first despite striking out four times in the frame.

Baggett reached on a dropped third strike, stole second, advanced to third and scored on passed balls.



Union County baseball team picture with bus driver Jim Stewart following their doubleheader at Social Circle on Friday night. Photo/submitted



Senior Andrew Brown at Social Circle. Photo/submitted

Baggett scored again in the fifth to make it a 2-0 game when he singled to left to leadoff the inning. Mancuso drew a one-out walk and Banton singled to center to bring Baggett home.

Trailing 3-2 in the seventh, Brown reached on an error and advanced to second on an errant pick off attempt.

Rich walked to put the go-ahead run on first with two outs but Smith ended the game with his second strikeout of the inning and fifth of the game.

Baggett and Brown opened the game with consecutive base hits at Rabun then scored on RBI singles from Rich and Banton for a 2-0 lead.

Mancuso issued five walks in the third inning but a double play limited the Wildcats to just one run in the inning.

The Panthers quickly answered with doubles by Cole Davis and Brown to extend the advantage back to two runs at 3-1 in the fourth.

Rabun responded with its only two hits of the day and manufactured a run by way of a stolen base and a ground out.

After Mancuso got the second out via strikeout, he issued a pair of walks - one intentional - then hit a batter.

Tied at 3-3 an error brought in two Wildcat runs before Mancuso hit his second batter of the inning.

Junior Josh Nachtrieb got the call from the bullpen and issued a walk to make it a 6-3 Rabun lead. A passed ball made it 7-3 but Nachtrieb settled down and didn't allow a hit over the final 2 1/3 innings, keeping Union

in the game.

In the sixth, the Panthers hit into a double play but still managed to put two aboard but couldn't cut into the deficit.

Union loaded the bases with one out in the seventh and following a strikeout for the second out, King was hit-by-a-pitch to make it a 7-4 game, but once again, the Panthers couldn't deliver a clutch hit.

On deck: Union has three non-region road games this week before hosting the first round of State next week.

Union traveled to Murphy, NC on Monday. Then Andrews, NC will host the Panthers on Thursday.

Why the No. 1 seed is so important in the State Tourney: With Region 8-AA drawing Region 5 in the first round, the top spot in next week's State Tournament will face No. 4 seed Manchester.

And there is a huge gap between the top three teams and the rest of Region 5-AA.

While 23-0 Bowdon is one of the best in the State, 5-AA's No. 2 team Heard County and 5-AA's No. 3 team Bremen, both sport double-digit win totals. Meanwhile, No. 4 Manchester is currently 6-15 overall.

No. 2 Heard and No. 4 Manchester met three times with Heard outscoring Manchester by a combined score of 28-9.

By drilling Social Circle 13-3, the Panthers have definitely put themselves in the best possible scenario to advance.

The Georgia High School Association has Apr. 29 listed as the start date for the Class AA State Tournament with Apr. 30 serving as the date for any third games - if necessary.