

Sports

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Baseball: Panthers rally in game one; rout in game two

Union County to host No. 4 Lovett on Tuesday/Wednesday with a Final Four spot at stake

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With the bases loaded, nobody out, and Bleckley County already leading 2-0, the Royals were on the brink of blowing things wide open in game one but an unassisted double play by first baseman RJ Banton allowed Union to escape the inning without further damage and would more importantly, turn the tide of the game and the series.

The Panthers, who had not reached the Elite 8 since 1995, would go on to take game one by a score of 4-2 before dismantling Bleckley County 16-0 in game two to set up a date with Lovett on Tuesday in Blairsville with a trip to the Final Four on the line.

Game one - Entering the fourth inning of the first game, Bleckley held a 1-0 advantage and tacked on another run with three straight singles to open the inning.

A walk loaded the bases, and with a full count on the ensuing batter, Union's senior ace Joseph Mancuso blew a fastball by the Royals' Carter Raffield for the first out. Then with an 0-2 count on Bleckley's Cole Brown, a Mancuso fastball was lined directly at Banton, who snagged the out and quickly stepped on first for the inning-ending double-play.

With momentum shifting in favor of the home team, the Panthers (19-7), who were hitless through three innings, began to catch a few breaks.

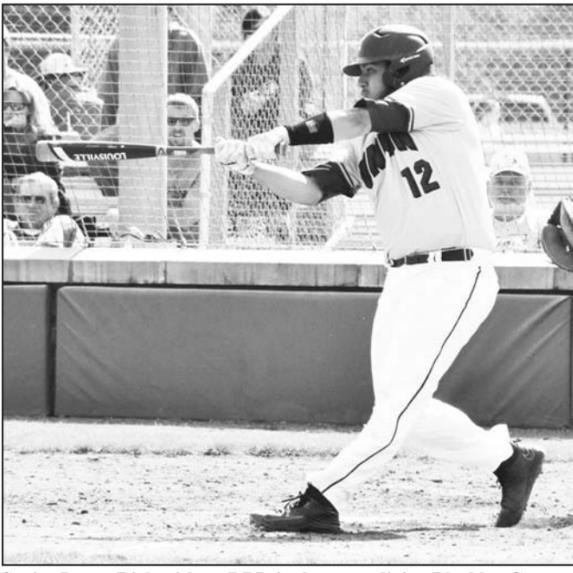
With one out, Mancuso placed a shot into left field that was misplayed by the Bleckley outfielder, allowing Mancuso to coast into second with a stand-up double.

Following a ground out that moved Mancuso to third with two down, the Panthers caught another break when the Royals' shortstop booted a routine ground ball off the bat of Banton that brought Union within a run at 2-1 after four innings.

The Panthers recorded two quick outs in the fifth but soon found themselves living dangerously for the second inning in-a-row when Bleckley placed runners on second and third following a base hit, a hit-by-pitch, and a passed ball.

With a 1-1 count, Mancuso induced a slow roller to second that was fielded cleanly by a charging Logan Dyer who tossed to Banton, just barely getting the out in a bang-bang play at first, much to the dismay of the Royals first base coach, who began jumping up-and-down in disagreement with the out-call.

Fortunate to be down by only a run, the Panthers broke through with three runs in the fifth



Senior Lance Rich with an RBI single past a diving Bleckley County third baseman for a 4-2 lead in game one. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Patrick Baggett was the spark plug for the top of the lineup that drove in 13 runs during the two wins. Photo/Todd Forrest

inning. Sophomores Crawford Colwell and Cole Davis opened the inning with consecutive base hits, but a fielder's choice and strikeout brought Mancuso to the plate with two-on and two outs.

Facing a 2-2 count, Mancuso sent a high-fly deep into left-center field that landed at the base of the fence for a two-run double. Leading 3-2 with Mancuso on second, senior Lance Rich smoked a grounder down the third base line for an RBI single.

On top 4-2 entering the top half of the sixth, Mancuso retired Bleckley 1-2-3. Raffield did the same to Union in the bottom of the sixth, setting the stage for the seventh inning.

With Mancuso still on the hill, he easily retired the first two hitters with a grounder to second and a swinging strike-three.

Benji Knighton, the Royals leadoff hitter, battled his way aboard with a six-pitch walk, bringing the tying-run to the plate.

Mixing in his offspeed pitches, Mancuso quickly got ahead of Bleckley's Ty Edge with a 1-2 count before getting him to bounce back to the mound for the final out of the game.

Mancuso went the distance for his sixth win of the year, striking out five, walking three, and scattering six hits - all coming in the first five innings.

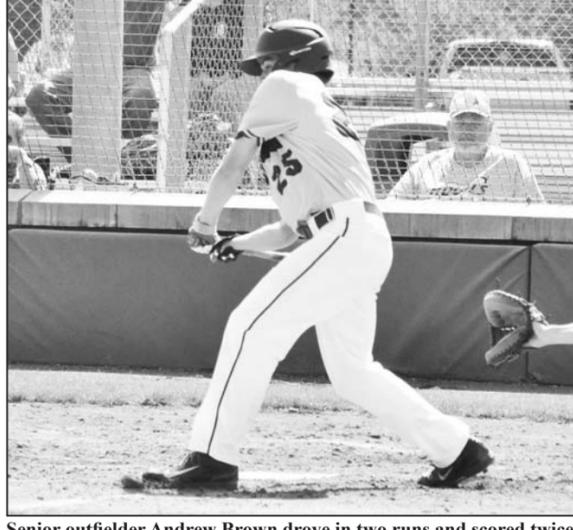
At the plate he went 2-for-2 with two doubles, 3 RBIs, and 2 runs. Rich finished 1-for-3 with an RBI. Davis was 1-for-2 with a run, Crawford Colwell was 1-for-3 with a stolen base, sophomore Patrick Baggett walked and scored a run, and junior Dawson Groves drew a walk.

Game two - The Panthers punished Bleckley County with small-ball and pinpoint accuracy from Rich in the second game using 12 singles, 5 walks, and 6 stolen bases to churn out 16 runs during a four-inning thrashing.

With rain moving in, com-



Senior Joseph Mancuso sends a high fly off the left-centerfield fence to score two runs and put Union ahead 3-2 in game one. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior outfielder Andrew Brown drove in two runs and scored twice from the No. 2 spot in the lineup during game two. Photo/Todd Forrest

pleting five innings was crucial, otherwise the game would start over in the result of a washout prior to the sixth inning.

Union County posted five runs - all coming on two outs in the second inning before blowing things wide-open with 11 runs in the fourth, bringing the mercy-rule into play, well before the storm clouds reached Blairsville.

Baggett and Mancuso each drove in three runs, while Brown, Rich, Dyer, and Candler Colwell knocked in two runs each.

Meanwhile, Lance Rich tossed three innings of perfect baseball, not surrendering a base hit until the fourth and final inning. He also opened Union's five-run second with a base hit before courtesy runner Chayton Schafer scored on a two-out single by Candler Colwell.

Crawford Colwell was hit-by-a-pitch and Dyer scored Candler Colwell with a base hit to left. Baggett made it a 4-0 game with

a single up-the-middle that scored Crawford Colwell and Dyer, who were both in scoring position following a double-steal.

Baggett swiped second and Brown singled back through the box - scoring Baggett and staking the Panthers to a 5-0 advantage.

During the 11-run fourth, Union sent 16 batters to the plate and victimized the Royals infield with three bunt singles that began following a Crawford Colwell walk when Dyer bunted his way aboard.

A stolen base and a wild pitch allowed Crawford Colwell to score then a Baggett single scored Dyer - giving Union a 7-0 lead. Baggett came around to score when Brown and Mancuso reached on consecutive bunt singles.

A passed ball allowed Brown to score on a Rich sacrifice fly, Groves drew a five-pitch walk, and Ean Harkins entered as his courtesy runner. Candler Colwell doubled to left, bringing in

Mancuso and increasing the Union lead to 10-0.

Crawford Colwell walked to load the bases and Dyer was plunked by a 3-1 pitch to score Harkins. Baggett reached on an error by the pitcher and Candler Colwell crossed the plate for a 12-0 score.

Crawford Colwell scored when Brown drew a free pass and Mancuso lined a base hit to center that brought home Dyer and Baggett. Rich made it 16-0 with an opposite field single that scored Brown.

Rich worked around a lead-off single in the bottom of the fourth to bring the game and the series to a close. The win was Rich's sixth of the season - matching Mancuso for the team lead. He also finished with three hits at the plate - two more hits than he allowed in four innings on the mound.

Baggett, Brown, Mancuso, Candler Colwell, and Dyer each finished with two hits. The top four hitters in the Panthers' lineup (Baggett, Brown, Mancuso, Rich) finished game two 9-for-14 with 10 RBIs.

During Union's four State playoff games, the top four batters in the lineup are hitting a combined .404 (21-52) with 19 RBIs, and 8 stolen bases.

Baggett, Crawford Colwell, and Dyer scored three runs each to lead the team. Candler Colwell and Brown scored twice.

Looking at the Lions - The Elite 8 series between the Panthers and Lovett (21-10) will get underway Tuesday at 4:30 p.m. with game two to follow. If necessary, game three will be played on Wednesday at 5:30 p.m.

The red-hot Lions, who have yet to host a series during the State Tournament, are coming off a pair of sweeps at Darlington and at Metter in the first two rounds. Prior to the postseason, Lovett won five of its final six regular season games (loss came at GAC) after sporting a mediocre 12-9 record midway through April.

During their four state tournament games, Lovett leadoff hitter and starting pitcher Aaron Schunk is leading the team with a .539 batting average including 3 home runs, and 7 RBIs. On the mound he has picked up the win in game one of both rounds. He has thrown 12 innings with 12 strikeouts, while allowing 10 hits, 5 earned runs, and one walk.

Sam Pritchard got the start in both game twos and hasn't allowed a walk in 13 innings. He has yielded just 8 hits and one earned run while fanning nine.

Overall, the Lions' pitching has issued only one walk over 27 innings of playoff baseball.

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Lady Panthers soccer season comes to a close in the Elite 8

Union demolishes Berrien in Sweet 16; top-ranked Pace Academy proves too much in quarterfinals

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Senior Rachel Vester scored three goals and freshmen Madison Yost and Anzly Sherman scored two each as Union (12-3) took care of business in the Sweet 16 for the second straight year.

Freshman Anzly Sherman put Union on the board in the game's seventh minute as the Lady Panthers cruised to a 7-0 victory over Berrien on Wednesday.

On Saturday, Union hosted No. 1 Pace Academy and for the second straight year, were shutout by a private school to end their season in the Elite 8.

Pace scored eight goals in the first half en route to a 10-0 victory over Union County, who finished the year as the final public school to be eliminated in Class AA.

During the win over Berrien, Vester scored goals No. 2 and No. 3 to give the Lady Panthers a 3-0 advantage, 14 minutes in.

Just shy of the midway point of the first half, Yost made it a 4-0 game off an assist from Layne Baenninger, her third of four assists on the day.

In the 26th minute, Vester found Sherman to stretch the lead to 5-0 at the intermission.

Baenninger and Ashlyn Hall got credit for the assist on Yost's second goal of the game and her team's sixth goal, less than 80 seconds into the second half.

Sherman fed Vester with 14 minutes to play for Union's final goal of the game.

Senior Ansley Garrison also recorded an assist on Vester's first goal of the contest.

Against Pace Academy, the visitors struck less than five minutes into the game and the



Union County Head Soccer Coach Tim Hunter greets senior Rachel Vester as she exits the field. Photo/Todd Forrest

score would remain 1-0 following a pair of saves by sophomore keeper Emmi Schakat during the ninth and 10th minute.

Pace broke through in the 12th minute to extend their lead to 2-0. The advantage would grow to 4-0 with a pair of goals in the game's 18th minute.

Five minutes later, Pace took a 5-0 lead before stretching it to 6-0 in the 29th minute.

Pace converted a corner kick in the 31st minute for a 7-0 score. Goal No. 8 came in the 34th minute for an 8-0 score at the break.

Pace tacked on two more goals during a 20-minute second half to improve to 16-2 on the year and advance to the Final Four.

Union County's schedule will look very different in 2017 as they join Region 7-AAA where No. 4 Dawson County and No. 6 Lumpkin County reside - both reached the Class AAA Elite 8.

AA to 7-AAA will be Greater Atlanta Christian, the No. 2 team in the state who is currently in the Final Four and looking for its third straight State Championship.

Moving down from Class AAAA to 7-AAA will be North Hall, who reached the Elite 8 in Class AAAA.

Other schools in the brutal Region 7-AAA will be Fannin County - a Sweet 16 team in AAA and East Hall - the only Region 7-AAA team that won't be coming off a State Tournament appearance when the season opens in February.

With just two seniors graduating, the Lady Panthers should be able to compete in an uber-tough 7-AAA next season.

However, its two seniors Vester (second leading goal scorer) and Ansley Garrison (second in assists) will be irreplaceable. But Union relied heavily on un-



Sophomore Layne Baenninger finished with a game-high four assists during Union's Sweet 16 win over Berrien. Photo/Todd Forrest

derclassmen in 2016, mainly freshmen Yost (leading goal scorer), and Sherman (third in goals scored).

Sophomores Brenna Innis (fourth in goals scored) and Layne Baenninger (first in assists) and junior Braedyn Robbins (fifth in goals scored), also contributed heavily.

Of the other four girls that scored goals in 2016, two were juniors, one was a freshman, and the other a sophomore.

Of the six girls that finished with 2 assists or less, two were juniors, two were sophomores, and two were freshmen.

Last but not least, Union's sophomore goalkeeper Emmi Schakat finished the year with 10 shutouts.



Senior Ansley Garrison

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