

Sports

See the Sports Section at nghanews.com

Pepperell pitching stifles Panthers; season ends in Sweet 16

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nghanews.com

Lindale - Union County was limited to five hits and one run in two games as the Panthers were knocked out of the State Baseball Tournament by Region 7-AA champion Pepperell High School by the scores of 2-1 and 8-0.

After eliminating a young and gritty Bowdon squad in the first round on Tuesday, Union went on the road Thursday where they faced a Pepperell squad who had dropped down from Class AAA, and owned the deepest pitching staff that Union has faced all season.

The Dragons were forced to play Game Three of their first round series against GAC on Wednesday, before turning around and hosting the Panthers on Thursday.

Pepperell's No. 3 pitcher threw a complete game shutout against a very talented GAC squad, and allowed the Dragons to save it's top two pitchers for the Panthers.

However, Union County junior Lane Everett went toe-to-toe with the Dragon ace in Game One before allowing two runs in the sixth, giving Pepperell the win and backing the Panthers into a corner.

The first meeting of the best-of-three series was a heavyweight matchup that you would expect with a spot in the Elite 8 on the line.

The Panthers left two stranded in the top of the first and Everett put the Dragons away in order in the bottom half of the first.

Following a walk by freshman Lance Rich, sophomore third baseman Jackson Burks was left stranded in the second after reaching on a fielder's choice.

Everett allowed a lead off double in the bottom of the second but got three straight pop outs to end the inning.

Union struck in the third when senior Wes Aulet doubled and came around to score after fellow senior T Bentley laced a base hit to left.

Everett kept Union's slim lead intact until the sixth inning where Union's offensive woes caught up to the Panther ace.

The Panther hurler allowed a leadoff single in the third and after a sacrifice bunt put the Dragon runner into scoring position, Everett got a pop out to third and a fly out to right to escape into the fourth with his squad clinging to its one run advantage.

Union went down in order in the fourth and Pep-



Sophomore Chase Barnett looks to the dugout for a sign from the coaches during Union's first game at Pepperell. The Panther catcher threw out two would-be base stealers in Game One. Photo/Todd Forrest

perell used a leadoff walk to put the tying run aboard. Everett answered by freezing the Dragon hitter on a curve for the first out.

The second out came via fly out to left fielder Cody Davenport and the third came when sophomore catcher Chase Barnett cut down the Dragon runner on a steal attempt.

Pepperell hand wrapped two gifts to the Panthers in the fifth but Union was unable to get any insurance runs across.

Zach Odom drew a one-out walk and junior Kalvin Duckworth was hit by a pitch, putting two on with one out and the heart of the Panther lineup coming to the plate.

Aulet, who hits in the third slot of the order went down swinging and with clean up hitter Bentley at the plate, Duckworth was picked off at first, ending the inning thus preventing Bentley from picking up his second RBI of the contest.

Everett continued to skate into the fifth, giving up a leadoff single, a fly out, then another base hit, putting the go-ahead run aboard with one out. Everett would fall behind 3-0 on the next hitter but battle back for his third strikeout of the contest, then get a pop out to short to end the inning.

Bentley came back to the plate in the sixth and smashed a liner into left, unfortunately

the left fielder was able to cut the ball off before reaching the fence, limiting Bentley to a single.

Everett laid down a sacrifice bunt, moving Bentley into scoring position with one out, but the senior would get no farther as Jared Croskey grounded out to short and Rich popped out to shallow left-center.

After living dangerously all day, Everett was finally touched up for two runs in the sixth that started with another lead off walk.

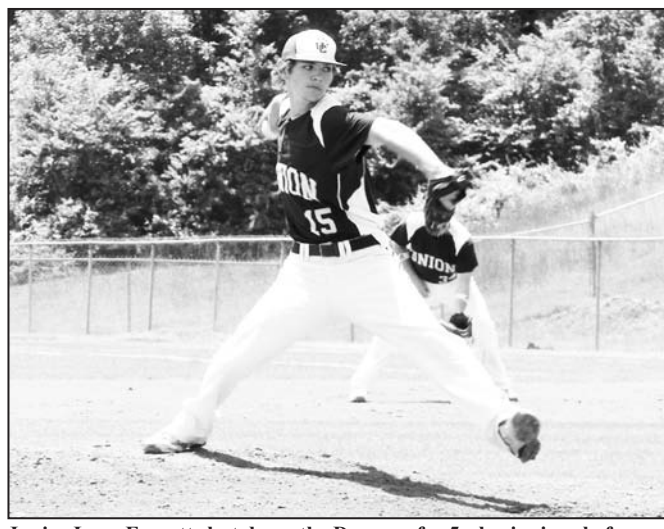
The next two hitters would triple and single putting the Dragons on top for the first time all series.

Pepperell would never trail again for the rest of the day.

After surrendering the lead, Union Head Coach Brandon Bradburn turned to sophomore Tyler Odom who benefited early by Barnett throwing out his second base runner of the game. Tyler Odom then retired the next two Dragons on a pop fly to centerfield and fanning another.

A pair of called strike threes in Union's final at bat put the Panthers in a tough spot but Zach Odom was able to draw a two-out walk. The senior shortstop was stranded when Duckworth was caught looking.

"We had a pretty good game plan with our pitching



Junior Lane Everett shut down the Dragons for 5-plus innings before surrendering two in the sixth. Unfortunately, Everett was unable to get any run support despite tossing one of his best games of the season. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Tyler Odom delivers a pitch during Game One at Pepperell. Odom gave Union some quality innings in relief during both games. Photo/Todd Forrest

going in," Bradburn said. "Our lack of offense was a combination of us struggling to put the ball in play, and two dominant pitchers for Pepperell. They didn't hit much better than us in the first game, but they got the big hit when they needed it most. Our offense score a run early on, but couldn't string together enough to put anything across the plate. Lane Everett pitched one of the best games of the year for us, but that doesn't always mean you will win the game."

After letting Game One slip through their fingers, Union was unable to recover as they were no-hit for 1 1/3 innings during an 8-0 loss.

Although, Coach Bradburn believes that the tough loss in the series opener had no impact on his team's state of mind, it was simply overpowering pitching from the hosts.

"I don't feel like losing Game One did anything mentally to us for Game Two," Bradburn said. "We knew we just needed to win at least one game on Thursday."

Riding high off a wave

of momentum from Game One, the Dragons got one in the first, two in the fourth, two in the sixth, and three in the seventh.

After the Panthers suffered 12 strikeouts in 5-plus innings, Aulet lined a base hit into left to end the no-hitter.

Two batters later, Croskey singled for Union's final hit of the game.

Despite an 8-0 score and only picking up two hits, Union was still in contention until late in the game.

Pepperell surrendered 4 leadoff walks in the first five innings, and walked the first two batters in the second, but Union was unable to come up with a hit, which potentially could have provided the Panthers with a much needed shift in momentum.

Duckworth got the call in Game Two and after allowing three hits in the first, the junior settled down and kept Union in the game thanks to 6 strikeouts.

"Duckworth showed a lot of heart and dominated Pepperell early," Bradburn said. "With a strike zone the size of

a Dixie Cup, he managed to pitch four quality innings, and gave us an excellent chance to win the game, which he always does. Once again we ran into a dominant pitcher from Pepperell, and couldn't get anything going. Their 3-0 lead felt much bigger due to the way the other kid was pitching."

Tyler Odom returned to the hill in relief of Duck to start the fifth and the sophomore shut the Dragons down.

An error to open the sixth allowed Pepperell to open the flood gates and stretch its lead to 5-0. With two on and two out, Tyler Odom recorded a strikeout to end the inning.

In the seventh, Croskey took the mound and gave up a lead off walk and back-to-back singles. He yielded a two-out, two-run double before getting a grounder to third to end the inning.

Davenport was hit by a pitch, and Zach Odom walked in Union's final at bat, but both were eventually left stranded.

Another baseball season is officially in the books and after losing a lot of talent from last season's 12-13 team, due to graduation, the Panthers answered with their best season in 18 years.

With several returning starters from 2012 either not playing, quitting, combined with a coaching change, this season could have easily been written off as a rebuilding year, but that was never the case.

Union County can be proud of the team that Coach Bradburn put on the field and know that better days are ahead for Panther baseball. After reaching state only once between 1995-2012, Union is set up perfectly to become a fixture in the State Tournament.

"After all was said and done, we achieved a lot of goals this year, some goals that hadn't been sniffed in a long time," Bradburn said. "Our guys left the field with their heads held high, because they knew the accomplishments of the season and all of the hard work they had put into this season. They earned their pride by working their tails off in the off season, getting bigger, stronger, and faster and most importantly, learning how to gel as a team."

That was our number one goal for the season, was to take all of the 'individual' out of the equation and play together as a team. Achieving that goal paved the way for one of the most successful seasons in Union County High School baseball in a long time, and set the example for the younger kids coming up in the program."

"With a strike zone the size of

Union overpowers Bowdon in Game Three, advance to Sweet 16

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nghanews.com

It took five days but Union County baseball advanced in a state tournament for the first time in 18 years.

After two rain outs, Union earned a shot at Pepperell by pounding the Bowdon Red Devils 8-1 in a critical must-win game for the Panthers last Tuesday.

T Bentley finished with 4 RBIs, including a three-run homer in the seventh.

Bentley's shot was the knockout blow as the Air Force cadet-to-be launched his first cruise missile over the left field fence, that was gone before he could get out of the batter's box.

Kalvin Duckworth picked up the win, working into the fourth inning before giving way to Lane Everett.

But before Bentley's heroics put the game away, it was his fellow senior and outfield mate Jared Croskey who sparked the Panthers in every phase of the game.

In the fourth, Croskey sent an opposite field liner into the gap that he turned into a triple thanks to his wheels. He then showed off his speed again by scoring on Cooper Patton's shallow pop fly to center for Union's third run of the game.

In the bottom half of the inning, with Everett on in relief of Duck and Bowdon threatening, Croskey cut down a Red Devil base runner on a force out at third when Jackson Burks stretched out to snag Croskey's frozen rope from center.



Jared Croskey



T Bentley



The Panthers celebrate after eliminating Bowdon in the first round of State. Photos by Todd Forrest

In the sixth, Bowdon loaded the bases with no-outs, but Everett whiffed the next two batters. With two outs, Croskey came through again with a diving catch in right-center to end the inning and keep Union's lead at 5-0.

After Bentley blew things open with his three-run blast, Croskey took the mound and finished off the Red Devils once and for all.

"I knew we would have a quick turnaround on Thursday, but we had to win the game

(Bowdon) first," Union Head Coach Brandon Bradburn said. "It was a great day for Union County baseball, winning the first round of state at home. It was a sweet win for the players, parents, coaches, and community."

The trio of Duckworth, Everett, and Croskey kept Bowdon in check, only allowing five hits and one unearned run in the seventh.

Wes Aulet finished with three runs scored while Croskey went 2-for-3 with a run.

Jones promoted to head coach as Panther basketball begins a new era

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nghanews.com

Union County didn't have to look far for its new basketball coach as Assistant Coach Casey Jones was promoted to head coach at last week's Board of Education meeting.

Last month, Coach David Tucker announced his resignation as boys basketball coach and Superintendent Gary Steppe announced that the search would begin from within the school system.

The answer was just one seat over from Coach Tucker on the Panther bench. And as soon as the news reached Facebook Friday morning about Jones' new gig, the comments were flooded with dozens of "likes" regarding Union County basketball's new boss.

"The first thing I thought when I heard the news is, 'it's go time,'" Coach Jones said. "I also thanked God for the opportunity. Without him, none of this would be possible."

Jones, a 1999 graduate of Union County High School, was a member of two 20-win teams and three regular season sub-region titles during the late '90s, when the resurgence of Panther basketball began under the late Head Coach Alan Ross.

Jones had just completed his sophomore year when Coach Ross passed away in May of 1997, but Jones will never forget his coaching philosophies, and the lead-by-example mantra that Coach Ross will forever

be remembered by.

"I guess you could say that I'm a Coach Ross disciple," Jones said. "He was all about full speed basketball. He loved to press and run the break. My philosophy will closely resemble his. He never stopped learning, and as a coach, I think that is very important."

"But Coach Ross was also a great man. He took the time to make sure that everything was going right in the lives of his players."

One event that stands out from Jones' playing days,



Casey Jones

epitomizes the type of coach and person that Jones aspires to be.

"I remember walking to the cafeteria during summer camp at Middle Tennessee State when Coach Ross came up to me, put his arm around me, and told me that if I needed anything, to just let him know, Jones said. "Only me, him, and God know what that did for me at that point in my life."

After the passing of his mentor, Jones was lucky enough to play for another iconic Union coach, Terry Rogers. That season, the Panthers

finished with a 24-2 record, compiling a 20-game winning streak - the second longest in school history.

"I learned the difference between flashing across the paint and being a flashlight from Coach Rogers," Jones said. "If you played on the 97-98 team you know exactly what I'm talking about. We had a great run that year with Coach Rogers leading the way."

One of Jones' teammates from his high school days will be joining him on the Panther bench.

"Kevin Hughes will be my assistant," Jones said. "His knowledge and passion for the game will be a huge asset to me and this program. We share the same philosophy and have the same vision for Union County basketball."

In his senior season, Jones played for an up-and-comer in the coaching business - Ben Corley.

Corley was in his first season as a Head Coach and eventually led Union County to back-to-back Region Championship appearances and an Elite 8 appearance.

It was in 2001, during Jones' second year of college that he realized that he wanted to enter the coaching field. And upon completion, he was able to coach along side Corley at Winder-Barrow.

"I was able to coach with Coach Corley for two years at Winder and I took away a lot of knowledge from him," Jones said. "The good thing about

See Jones, Page 13A