

Sports

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Panthers post season-high 41 on Riverside for Homecoming

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

Union County is now 5-1 thanks to a 41-13 shellacking of Riverside Military Academy on Friday night.

T Bentley led the charge for the Panthers with four touchdowns. The senior threw for two scores and rushed for two more as Union County easily handled the Eagles for their second Region 8-AA win of the season.

The Panthers are out of the gates with their best six-game stretch to open the season since 2001. After letting the idea of starting 5-1 sink in for a moment, junior lineman Luther Jones was not shocked, but he was in awe.

“Just talking about it gives me chills,” Jones said. “God has really blessed this team and everything is going great right now. We’ve got the athletes, the work ethic, the coaching, and the heart. That’s the biggest thing, we’ve got the heart.”

There was never a more defining moment showcasing the heart of this Panther unit than what was witnessed in the waning seconds of the game. In the final moments, freshman Nick Whittle broke loose for a 52-yard touchdown run, his first varsity score.

As Whittle returned to the sideline he was greeted by each of his teammates as everyone celebrated a truly blessed chapter in this young man’s already inspirational life story.

“That touchdown was the most amazing feeling in my whole entire life,” Whittle said. “It’s the first touchdown I’ve scored on varsity and it just feels amazing right now. It’s one of the best feelings ever. You have no idea how bad I wanted into the game. I was bugging the coaches to put me in.”

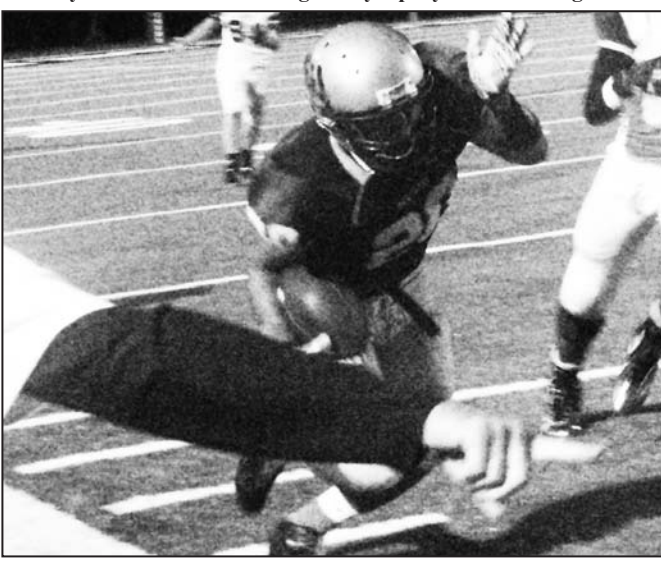
Coach Brian Allison is well aware of his freshman’s



Clay Burnette and Jake Rogers say a prayer before the game.



Union County quarterback T Bentley powers his way forward.



Lalo Rivera is directed towards the end zone during a TD reception.



Matthew Spiwak and Cody Davenport finish a tackle.

Photos by Todd Forrest and Lowell Nicholson

capabilities and knows this is only the first of many more touchdowns to come for his young running back.

“He made a great run while they still had their first team defense on the field,” Coach Allison said. “He’s going to be a force to be reckoned with down the road for us.”

The Panthers only held a 14-0 lead at the break after it looked as if Union would deliver the knockout blow early in the first half.

After Brett Dietz stuffed an Eagle run on 4th-and-1,

Bentley hit Lalo Rivera for a first down on 3rd-and-8. On the same drive, Union was forced into a 4th-and-1 but Bentley, converted with two of his 49 rushing yards on the evening to keep the drive alive. The Panther signal caller would cap off the drive with a 4-yard scoring run to give Union an early 7-0 edge.

On the ensuing drive, Dietz would again pick up another tackle-for-a-loss which would later result in an Eagle punt.

Jonathan Hughes would do all the leg work after the

Panthers took over on offense at their own 33-yard line.

The senior running back would carry the ball twice, putting the Panthers in business at midfield. That’s when Bentley hit Hughes on a screen pass that was taken 49-yards to give Union a 14-0 lead with 10:07 to play before half.

A risky call by Riverside on fourth down from their own 41 resulted in a Panther stop and set up Union with optimal field position. The drive would quickly cease when Union fumbled on it’s second play of

the series.

Both teams would exchange punts before the first half came to a close with Union holding a two-touchdown advantage.

The Panthers used a methodical drive early in the second half, mixing the ground-and-pound game of Hughes, with Bentley’s precision passing to take a 21-0 lead when Hughes found pay-dirt from the 1-yard line.

Coach Allison would have preferred to continue hammering the Eagles with

a steady dose of Bentley and Hughes, but Riverside forced his hand and the Union offense began to open things up in the second half.

“I’m a little bit of a conservative play caller,” Coach Allison said. “We were up 14-0 and running well. But at half-time we agreed that we needed to open it up just a little bit because they were starting to bring eight into the box and we couldn’t block them when they were bringing eight guys.”

The Panther defense, which has been solid all year, forced a Riverside turnover on the Eagle 12-yard line that allowed Bentley to pick up his second rushing touchdown – this time from 3 yards out.

With Union leading 28-0 early in the fourth quarter, Riverside put its first points on the board thanks to a 50-yard rushing score to make it a 28-7 game.

Union quickly squashed any momentum that the Eagles may have gained on the previous possession by putting the game on ice with a 45-yard scoring hookup from Bentley to Rivera, giving Union a 34-7 lead with 7:43 to play.

An interception by Jonah Whittmer handed the ball back to the Panthers but Union suffered from a fumble that resulted in Riverside’s final score of the game with 48 seconds to go.

Then Whittle’s touchdown with five seconds remaining put an exclamation point on Union County’s homecoming day festivities.

“We worked our hind ends off this week in practice and I thought our guys did a really nice job tonight,” Coach Allison said. “I couldn’t be any more proud than I am of our defense. We allowed 13 points but those came after we started subbing. We had a bunch of guys that played well on offense and defensively. I can’t wait to go back and look **See Football, page 11A**

Bremen sweeps Lady Panthers; brings season to a close

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

The Union County Lady Panthers’ season came to an abrupt end last week at the hands of the Bremen Lady Blue Devils.

The 8th-ranked Lady Panthers took not one, but two on the chin last Wednesday night, under the lights at the Union County Softball Complex. Union fell 6-1 in Game One and 8-0 in Game Two.

In the first game, The Lady Blue Devils jumped out to a 2-0 lead in the first inning, but the Lady Panthers answered with a one-run fourth. Union wouldn’t score again.

Bremen added two more in the sixth and used a two-run homer in the seventh to put Union away.

To say the Lady Panthers had their struggles would be an understatement regarding a proud and tradition-heavy softball program like Union County.

In Game One, Union was out-hit 11-5, committing three errors to Bremen’s zero, Union also finished 1-10 with runners on base.

“The main reason we lost these two games was not being able to hit with runners in scoring position,” Coach Jessica Stewart said. “It takes patience to hit with runners on. It also adds a little pressure and we could not overcome it in the last three games.”

As expected, Coach Stewart went with pitcher Bailey Byers in Game One, and following a rocky start, it appeared as if the senior had settled into a groove. However, a one-out error in the sixth, coupled with a two-out walk opened the gates for Bremen to sprint ahead to a 4-1 lead. Then in the seventh, a two-out walk spelled trouble for Union as the next batter lined a shot over the right-center field fence.

Union’s bats were led by Carly Adams, as the senior finished 2-for-2 with a walk. Unfortunately Adams was left stranded three times.

It wasn’t until the fourth when a lead off single by Courtney Busbee momentarily sparked the Lady Panther of-



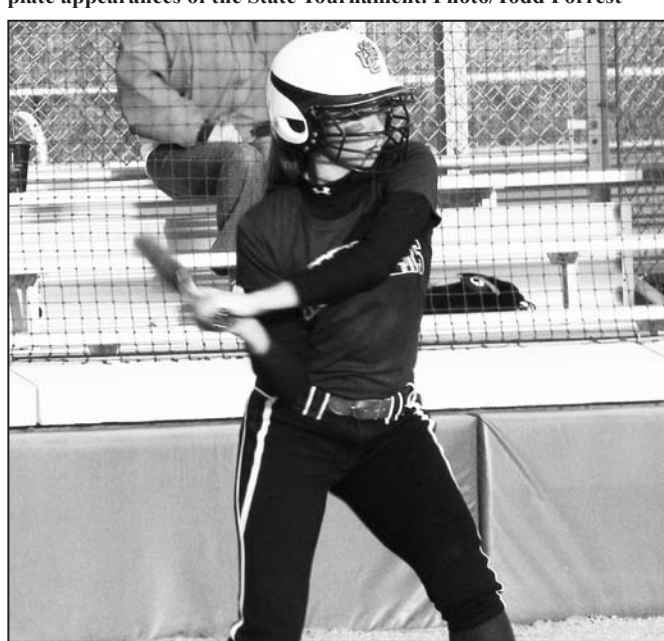
Senior Amber Seeba covers a Bremen bunt as senior pitcher Bailey Byers gets out of the way of the throw. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior center fielder Carly Adams reached bases in her first four plate appearances of the State Tournament. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Hannah Hughes catches a pop fly. Hughes leaves Union with school records in homers, walks, and RBIs. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Shawna Brown knocked in Union’s only run when she just missed a home run by a few inches. Photo/Todd Forrest

fense. The sophomore catcher advanced to second courtesy of a passed ball to set the table for Shawna Brown.

Brown would smash a long-single off the top of the center field fence – scoring Busbee. Then Union’s bats went as cold as the chilly autumn air that evening, surrendering three consecutive outs following back-to-back hits.

Union’s only other scoring opportunity came in the fifth inning when Adams reached on a one-out single and was advanced into scoring position by Madison Rich. Hannah Hughes was walked and a wild pitch advanced both Adams and Hughes into scor-

ing position. Union was unable to come up with a two-out hit – leaving Adams and Hughes high and dry.

In the second game, the same scene played out again for the Lady Panthers. Union opened the first with a lead off single from Adams, a sacrifice bunt from Rich, and a walk to Hughes. The two advanced on another wild pitch but the heart of the Union lineup was unable to push across any runs.

Bremen scored a run in their half of the first off a double and a single. The Lady Panthers would go three-up and three-down in the second and third inning while Bremen tacked on five more runs in the

second, knocking junior pitcher Chelsey Cook out of the game, bringing Crystal Busbee to the circle.

The sophomore allowed a hit but Union escaped when Adams cut down a Lady Blue Devil base runner at the plate. Union’s half of the fourth showed some promise when Hughes and Brown opened with singles but all the offense could muster was a fly-out, a fielder’s choice, and a line out to third.

Bremen added two more in the bottom of the fourth to make it an 8-0 game. Union would go down in order in the fifth, ending the game early due to the mercy rule.

Adams finished with a 1-for-3 evening. Hughes went 1-for-1 with a walk and Brown went 1-for-2.

The Lady Panthers finished with 18 wins and a regular season Region 8-AA title, but for the second consecutive year were unable to get past the first round of state.

Coach Stewart attributes some of Union’s struggles during the 2012 post season to playing in a weaker region. In the two previous seasons, Union was battle tested all year long by the likes of Fannin County and Dawson County, along with North Oconee and Jackson County on the south side of the sub-region. This

season, all four of those schools moved up to Class AAA, leaving Union in a much lesser region. Although, Coach Jessica Stewart isn’t using that as an excuse.

“Region 8-AA was a weaker region this year without Fannin, Dawson, North Oconee and Jackson but you have to make the adjustment,” she said. “We played in the bigger tournaments to face better competition. We just didn’t hit in the important games and that’s what it came down to.”

Another factor for the Lady Panthers’ late season struggles could be chalked up to clinching the top-seed in the Region and a state tournament berth so far out. Union clinched a state playoff berth in late August, following their win over Jefferson. The Lady Panthers then wrapped up the top-seed and home field advantage during early September. Union closed the regular season with a 1-7 record before jumping into Region Tournament play.

“Overall, we had a pretty good season,” Coach Stewart said. “Losing our four seniors from last year, that three of the four had started since their freshman year was tough. I think we did a good job of recovering from that this year. Byers kept us in almost every ball game she pitched. Defense as team was pretty solid with a .930 fielding percentage. Hitting started off really hot and as the season progressed it went downhill as we started seeing better pitching.”

At the end of the day, the Union County Lady Panthers can hold their heads high knowing that they met many of the goals that they had set out for. Meanwhile, the seniors can hang their hats on being the first class in team history to never miss a State Tournament.

“I was happy with the girls and the season we had but I’m never satisfied with losing,” Coach Stewart said. “However, we played for a region championship and we made it to the state playoffs which is something we strive towards every year. This year it wasn’t our turn. I’ll definitely miss my five seniors and I’m really thankful for what they’ve given to our softball program.”