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PANTHERS

FALL SPORTS PREVIEW

Football

Cheerleading

Band

Cross Country

Softball

Volleyball



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2025-2026

All Eyes on Autumn: Union County's 2025 fall storylines

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

The first serves and swings of the season are in the books for Union County's volleyball and softball squads, and the gridiron and cross-country courses won't be far behind. By week's end, all four Panthers fall sports will be in full stride.

Here are a few things to watch this fall as temperatures drop and leaves change in the coming months.

Football – For the second consecutive August, Union County leaves its scrimmage with bad news on the injury front. Senior quarterback Cade Dockrey tore his ACL in the preseason for the second-straight year after spending much of the spring and summer battling sophomore Kamden Kendrick for the job.

However, the Panthers and first-year head coach Rob Stowe are in better position this season to absorb the loss of Dockrey, thanks to the emergence of Kendrick following last year's injury to the team's starting quarterback.

Kendrick took his lumps early as a freshman but showed promise by mid-season, eventually leading Union back to

the playoffs while throwing for more than 1,600 yards and 14 touchdowns.

Last fall, Kendrick leaned heavily on seniors Connor Schuknecht (RB) and Maddox Young (WR), but will the sophomore find enough weapons in the offensive arsenal to put Union County in the mix in a wide-open Region 7-AA?

Softball – To say Union County's strength is its pitching would be an understatement after junior Izzy Anthros set a school record with 19 strikeouts in the season opener vs. Rabun County.

But how much run support she receives will determine how far the Lady Panthers go in a deep region. Anthros will provide a solid bat from the leadoff spot, while senior Delaney Moses and sophomores Stella Collins and Lexi Davenport have delivered in the early going. However, the Lady Panthers will need to find offense elsewhere in the lineup to contend in Region 7-AA.

Sophomore Addison Whitener, junior Jules Dyer and seniors Peyton Grisham, Zady Ludlum and Jaslyn Roberts have all been through the region grind before and are capable of providing a boost to the offense, but will it be enough to return to the Elite Eight?

Volleyball – Most programs in Union County's position would consider 2025 a rebuild, but with a wave of talent in the ninth and 10th-grade classes, along with a couple of incoming transfers, fourth-year head coach Megan Brown will likely just reload.

Despite losing a handful of three-year starters to graduation, Union can still lean on a solid core of seniors Reese Jones and Mady Adams, along with junior Sofia Foster.

The question is, how much of an impact will the youngsters and transfers have in 2025? No doubt the future is promising, but will this year's squad arrive ahead of schedule and prove it's ready for the bright lights of region and postseason play?

Cross Country – Lola Hunter is back for her senior year, and you can almost guarantee she'll be in the mix for a state title this November.

On the boys side, junior Oliver Hillman came on strong late in 2024 and has a shot at making some noise at the state meet. Both teams return the bulk of their top runners from a year ago and expect to be standing on the podium at season's end. The only question: How high on that podium will they be?



Junior Izzy Anthros kicked off the fall sports season with a record-breaking 19-strikeout performance vs. Rabun.

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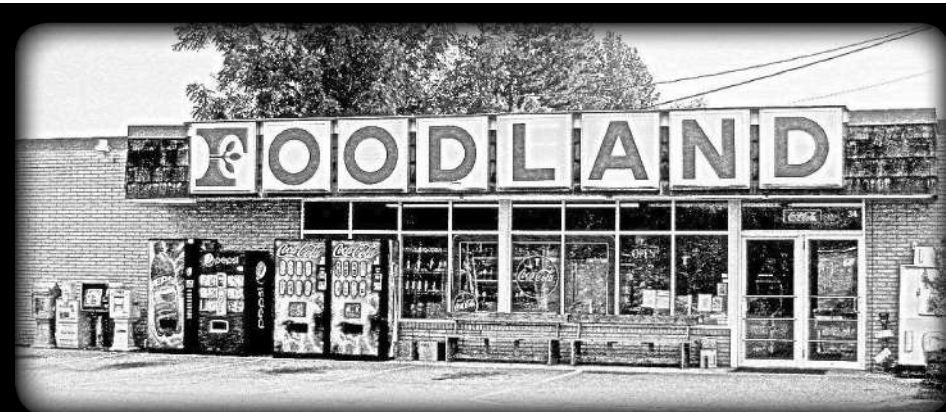
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Football: Young Panthers eye postseason despite early setbacks

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Coming out of the Aug. 8 scrimmage at Chestatee, Union County first-year head coach Rob Stowe was still undecided on his starting quarterback for 2025. By Wednesday, Aug. 13, that question was answered for him when an MRI revealed another season-ending knee injury for senior QB Cade Dockrey.

Fortunately for Stowe and the Panthers, the young man under center this fall will be sophomore Kamden Kendrick — a returning starter with 11 games and 14 touchdown passes on his résumé.

Kendrick shined over the summer while Dockrey battled a separate, unrelated injury, taking the majority of snaps in camp and 7-on-7 action. The extra reps allowed him to build crucial chemistry with a young receiving corps.

Headlining the receiving unit this fall are sophomores Mikey Davis and Haze Burnett, along with returning senior Tyler Parker and junior Chetley Cox.

The Panthers did lose standout wide receiver Maddox Young to graduation, but Parker hauled in five touchdowns in

2024 and Cox finished with 26 receptions. Additionally, junior Robert Thompson is expected to be another top target for Kendrick this fall.

Union County also needs to replace a 1,000-yard rusher in Connor Schuknecht, and junior Bentley Rich appears ready to take over as the new workhorse back, following in the footsteps of Schuknecht and Braylen Rader (2022-23).

Another option in the backfield is senior Daniel McPhee, who spent most of his first three seasons in the defensive secondary before moving to offense in the spring.

Up front, the offensive line will look different than it did in the spring game. Junior tackles Easton Shumaker and Jaxon Totherow are no longer with the program (transfers), but the Panthers gained a boost this summer with the arrival of junior tackle Logan Clason — a 6-foot-6, 320-pound transfer from south Florida. Seniors Trent Webster and Kye Burnette also return to provide a wealth of experience on the interior.

Defensively, the line is anchored by returning junior starters Alan Godinez and Gunner Franklin. Last year, Godinez re-

corded five tackles for loss and 2.5 sacks to lead the unit.

The star of the 2025 defense could reside in the linebacker spot, sophomore Micah Wallace, who started as a freshman and recorded 73 tackles, six TFLs, an interception and a fumble recovery.

Junior safety Brandon Lynch also returns to the secondary after recovering from a shoulder injury during the spring and summer. Lynch posted 74 tackles, three TFLs, two sacks and a fumble recovery as a sophomore.

Others to watch on defense include junior cornerback Sir Zion Thompson, sophomore end Jax Dillinger, junior end Eric Morales, along with Rich (LB) and Parker (DB).

Junior Grant Smith is back at kicker after a breakout 2024 season in which he connected on Union's first field goal in three years.

Despite fielding a young squad this fall, Region 7-AA is up for grabs with Rockmart and North Cobb Christian losing several key players from a year ago. However, North Murray and Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe are expected to be much improved and in the mix to end Rockmart's streak of eight straight region titles.



Sophomore quarterback Kamden Kendrick is ready to lead Union County High School into the Rob Stowe-era.



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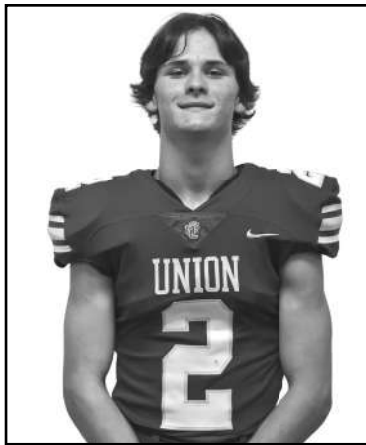




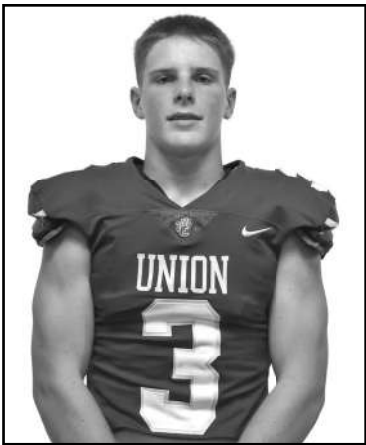
#0 Daniel McPhee (Sr)



#1 Cade Dockrey (Sr)



#2 Brandon Lynch (Jr)



#3 Isaac Milam (Jr)



#4 Bentley Rich (Jr)



#5 Mikey Davis (So)



#6 Chetley Cox (Jr)



#7 Sir Zion Thomson (Jr)



#8 Dominick Tarbert (Sr)



#9 Sean Rosa (So)



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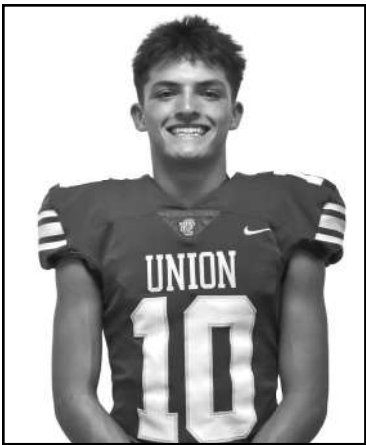
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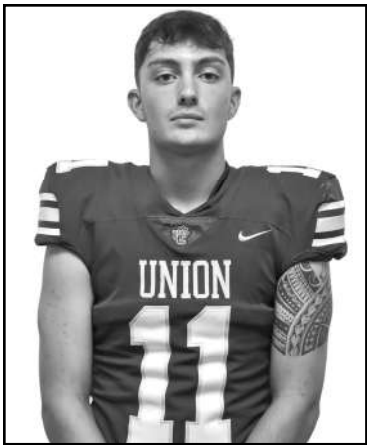
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#10 Haze Burnett (So)



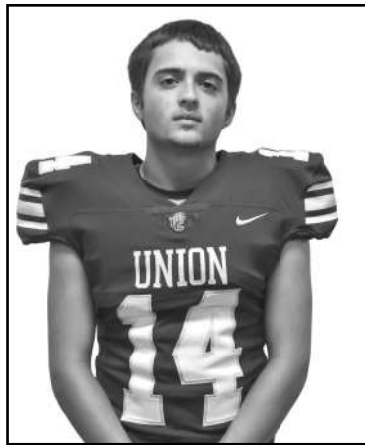
#11 Tyler Parker (Sr)



#12 Hudson Collins (So)



#13 Dylan Birnbaum (So)



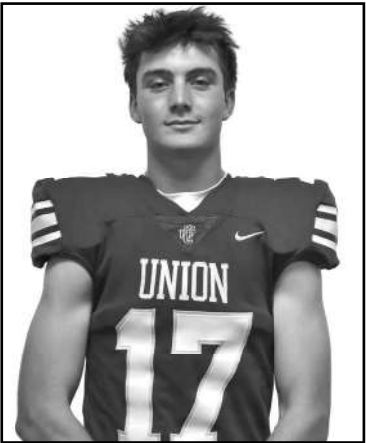
#14/19 Nathan Perez (Fr)



#15 Kyler Juracka (So)



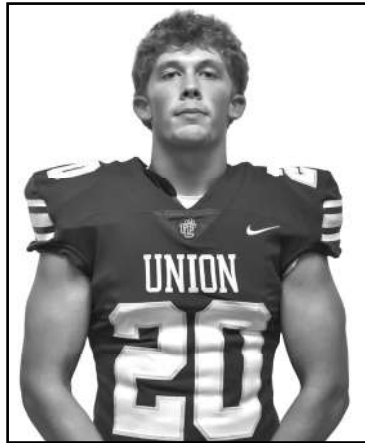
#16 Grant Smith (Jr)



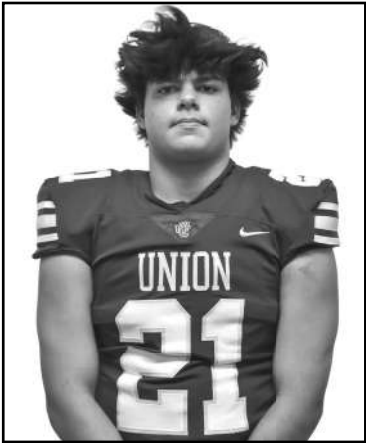
#17 Kamden Kendrick (So)



#18 Preston Banton (Jr)



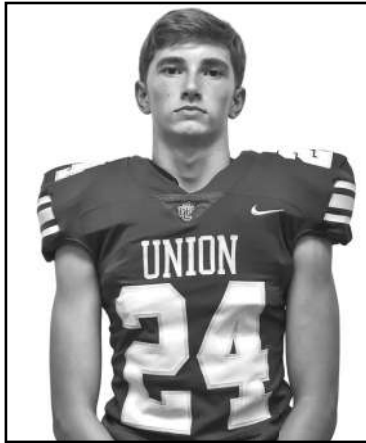
#20 Rob Thompson (Jr)



#21 Daniel Wrench (So)



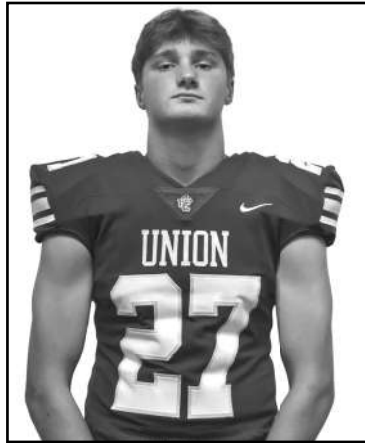
#22 Christian Mullin (Jr)



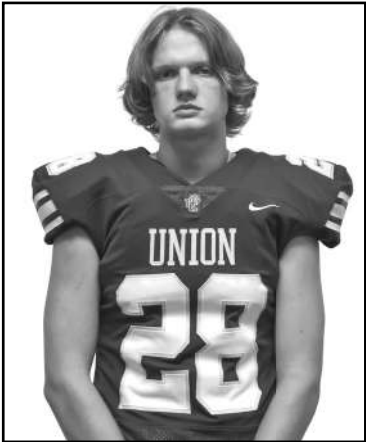
#24 Wyatt Yancey (Fr)



#26 Ayden Weaver (Fr)



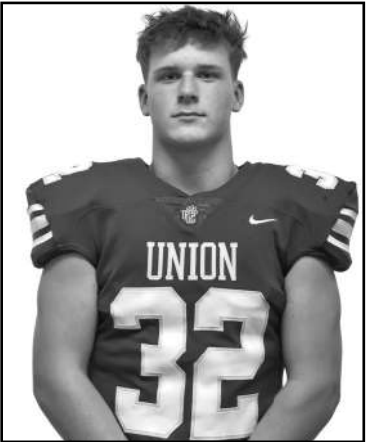
#27 Micah Wallace (So)



#28 Nathan Webster (So)



#30 Christiaan Jordaan (Fr)



#32 Eli Milam (So)



#36 Luke Morris (Fr)



#43 Blake Webster (Fr)



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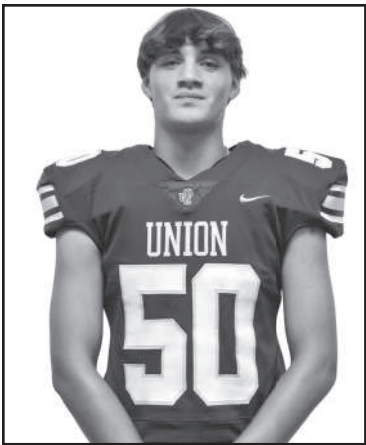
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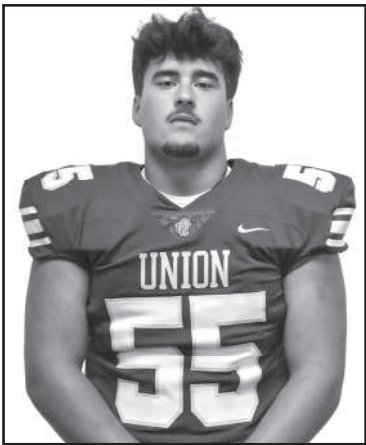
#50 Anthony Heredia (Sr)



#52 Eric Morales (Jr)



#53 Aldyn Lands (Fr)



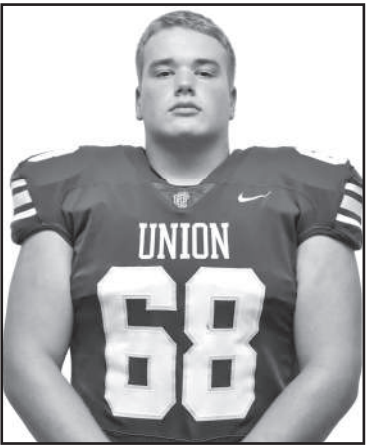
#55 Kye Burnette (Sr)



#58 Logan Clason (Jr)



#62 Trent Webster (So)



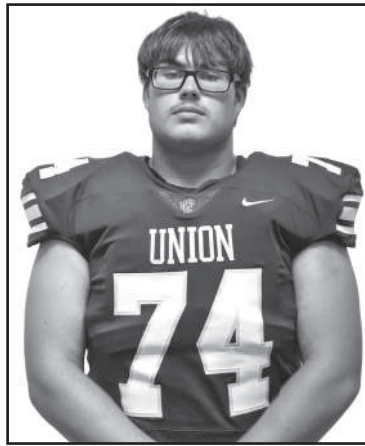
#68 Gunner Franklin (Jr)



#69 Ben Thompson (Fr)



#70 Colton Brittian (Fr)



#74 Sam Quillian (So)

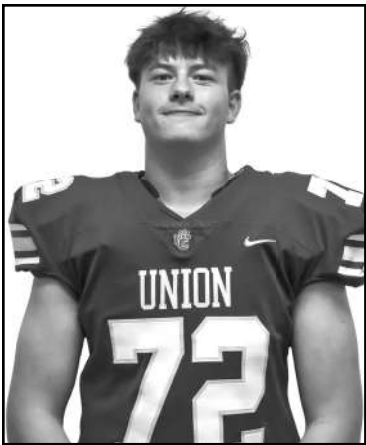
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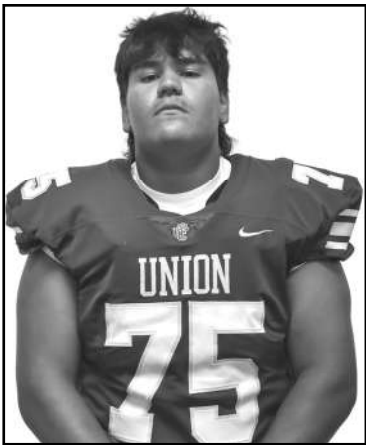
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#72 Wade Williams (Sr)

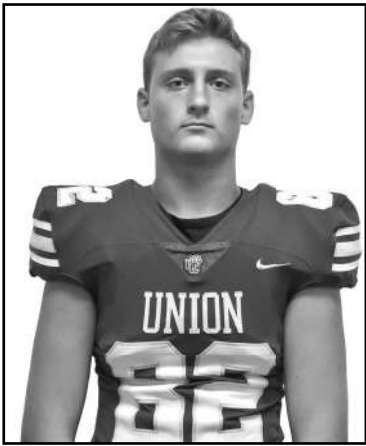


#75 Alan Godinez (Jr)



Not Pictured

#80 Parker Vinez (Jr)



#82 Jax Dillinger (So)

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VS. ROCKMART SEPTEMBER 12TH		@ SONORAVILLE OCTOBER 24TH	
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Softball: Lady Panthers blend experience, young talent in 2025

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Following a sixth-place finish at state in 2024, Union County softball is reloading for another postseason push with a roster blending veteran leadership, pitching depth and promising young talent.

Second-year head coach Robby Roxbury said the biggest question heading into the 2025 season is finding the right combination in the pitcher's circle to complement junior ace Izzy Anthros, who opened the year with a school-record 19-strikeout performance.

Senior Ayla Jamison has emerged as the frontrunner for the No. 2 starter role, particularly in doubleheaders.

The Panthers also expect contributions from sophomore Lexi Davenport in a relief role. Roxbury said she has shown steady improvement, displaying a consistent approach in the circle.

Behind the plate, Union County is making a defensive shift. Davenport, who caught part-time last season, will take over full-time duties, while junior Jules Dyer — last year's primary catcher

— transitions to second base. The rest of the infield will feature a mix of returning starters and new contributors, with senior Peyton Grisham back at third base, sophomore Addison Whitener moving over from second base to shortstop, and seniors Jaslyn Roberts and Zady Ludlum sharing time at first base and designated hitter.

The outfield will have a fresh look in left and centerfield. Junior Ella Akins and sophomore Stella Collins are stepping into starting roles, while senior Delaney Moses, the team's returning leader in homers, stays in right field after providing consistent offense and defense last year.

Offensively, Collins, Davenport and Whitener will follow Anthros to provide plenty of pop at the top of the order. Dyer, Ludlum, Moses, Roberts and Grisham are expected to round out the Lady Panthers' lineup.

Speed could also be a weapon for the Panthers, with sophomore Leighton Hunter impressing as a pinch-running option thanks to her quickness and sharp baserunning instincts.

Roxbury said two freshmen, Ava Stover and Marlee Cisneros, could push

for playing time early. Both have drawn praise for their skill level and poise despite their youth.

Through the first two weeks of the season, Anthros (1.656) and Collins (1.188) are both sporting an OPS over 1.000, with Ludlum (.917) and Moses (.829) right behind.

Davenport's 4 RBIs are tied for the team lead with Anthros.

Meanwhile, Anthros owns a 3-0 record, a 0.41 ERA and a 0.47 WHIP in the circle with 44 strikeouts in 17 innings. Jamison is second on the team with eight strikeouts over 10 innings of work.

Union County's schedule will again feature a competitive non-region slate to prepare for a challenging Region 7-AA race. The Panthers opened region play against defending champion Rockmart, a matchup that could set the tone for the rest of the year.

With a proven ace and leadoff hitter in Anthros, an emerging rotation behind her, and a lineup anchored by experienced seniors and underclassmen, Union County enters the season confident it can remain among Georgia's Class AA contenders.



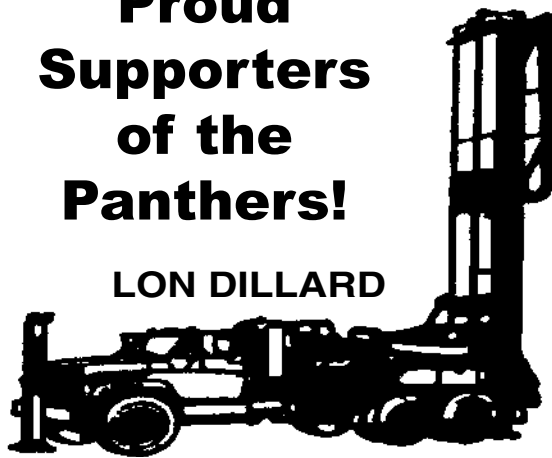
Sophomore Addison Whitener moves over from second base to shortstop this fall.

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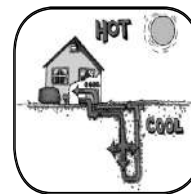
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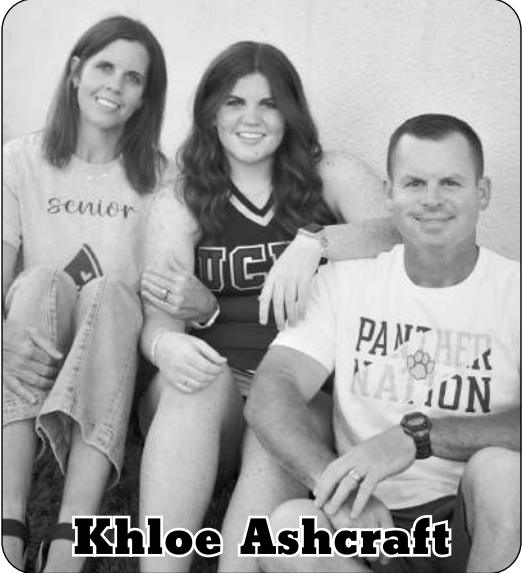
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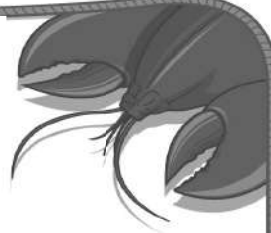
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Union County softball seniors: (L-R) Jaslyn Roberts, Zady Ludlum, Ayla Jamison, Delaney Moses and Peyton Grisham

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Volleyball: UC ready to prove it's still a contender in tough 7-AA

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Despite graduating four senior starters from last year's Elite Eight squad, Union County volleyball is far from rebuilding mode as it prepares for the 2025 campaign.

The Panthers return a solid core of veterans and a wave of young talent that head coach Megan Brown hopes will keep them competitive in one of the state's toughest regions.

Leading the charge is senior outside hitter Reese Jones, who missed much of her junior year due to injury but has returned at full strength after an active offseason. Brown expects her to be a focal point of the offense from day one.

Jones is joined by fellow seniors Mady Adams and Jordan Beaver, giving Union a mix of returning leadership and new additions. Beaver transferred into the program last season, while Adams has been a steady presence on the court.

"We have a wide range of experience levels this year, from players who've never been on a varsity court to those with multiple seasons under their

belt," Brown said. "The upperclassmen have set a great tone this summer, and the younger players are feeding off that energy."

Junior Sofia Foster also returns after a breakout sophomore season. Having picked up the sport only as a freshman, her quick development has impressed the coaching staff and made her one of the region's most intimidating players at the net.

The roster has also been bolstered by newcomers Austin Beal, Blair Hedden and Amie Sauers, along with a freshman class that numbers in the double digits, headlined by starter Kamryn Brown. While most first-year players will spend time on junior varsity, Coach Brown believes the influx of talent will strengthen the program in the years to come.

Union's summer workouts have been busy, with the Panthers logging plenty of time in scrimmages and drills to build chemistry. Coach Brown said the group's work ethic has been one of the summer's highlights.

"They've all put in the effort," she said. "Now it's about carrying that momentum into August."

The schedule doesn't offer much

room for a slow start. Union remains in Region 7-AA, which proved its strength last fall when three teams reached the Class AA Elite Eight. The Panthers themselves made it that far before being eliminated by Ringgold, while region champ North Cobb Christian advanced to the Sweet 16 in the private-school bracket.

That level of competition means every region match is a challenge, but Brown sees value in the underdog role her team may inherit this year.

"It's a tough region, no doubt," Coach Brown said. "But that can work in our favor. We've got something to prove, and I think this group is ready for that."

Union County opened its 2025 season in early August with a win over Franklin County and a loss to Banks County. They followed up by defeating Dawson County, Gilmer, Lumpkin County and Rabun County last week.

And while Brown knows the roster is still finding its identity, she believes the foundation is already in place for another strong season.

"With the mix of leadership, talent and attitude we have, I think we can compete with anyone," she said. "Now it's about going out and doing it."



Senior Reese Jones is healthy and ready to lead Union County to another postseason run.

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Union County volleyball team

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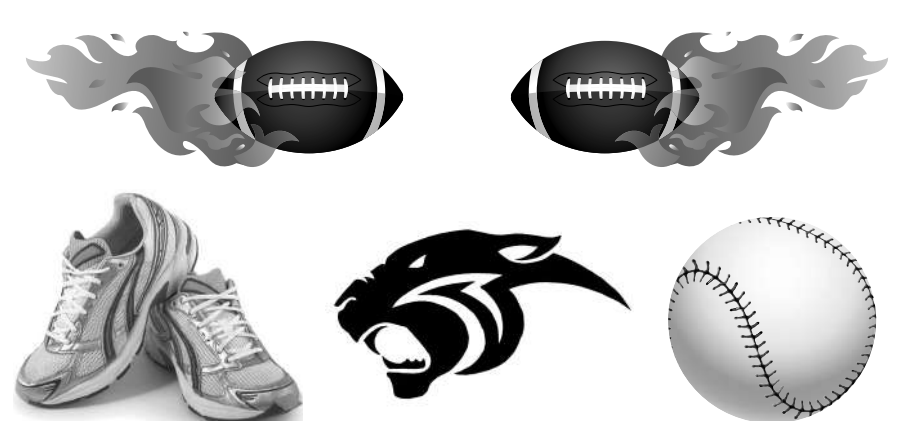


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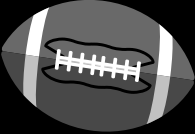
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Union County volleyball seniors: (L-R) Jordan Beaver, Mady Adams and Reese Jones



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Hunter, Hillman lead loaded cross country squads into 2025

By Todd Forrest
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Big things are in store for Union County cross country this fall.

On Saturday, Nov. 1, Meeks Park will host the girls and boys Class AA State Sectionals — the qualifier race for the Class AA State Championships in Carrollton.

As for the kind of teams Union County will send to the starting line on Nov. 1, head coach Paige Dyer feels confident in both the boys and girls squads — each of which posted top-six finishes at state last November.

“I’m super excited about this season,” she said. “(Both teams) have looked good, and I’m expecting really good things from them.”

On the girls’ side, three-time state placer Lola Hunter returns for her senior year after finishing third at the 2024 State Championships. Hunter also placed eighth in 2022 and fifth in 2023.

Unfortunately, while battling for second place at last year’s state meet, Hunter collided with a spectator who entered the course, all but ending her

chances for a top-two finish.

On the heels of that frustrating ending, Dyer said Hunter has her sights set firmly on bringing home a Class AA state title.

“Two girls finished ahead of her at state last year, and one of them graduated,” she said. “The other one, Lola beat last spring (in the 3200-meter race) during track, so that’s a good sign.”

Overall, the girls team placed third at state behind Savannah Arts Academy and Columbus. Among Union’s top five finishers, only Lydia Wagner graduated. The team also lost Katie Payne, the seventh Panther to cross the finish line.

Joining Hunter among the returners from last year’s top seven are senior Avery Hussion (41st at state), sophomore Macy Payne (46th), senior Averie Tanner (49th) and sophomore Kate Barrett (62nd). Dyer also praised the newcomers to this year’s squad and believes they will be a factor as well.

Among last year’s top-10 girls’ teams, champion Savannah Arts graduated its No. 1 and No. 3 runners; Columbus lost its No. 2 and No. 5; fourth-place East Jackson returns its entire top five; fifth-place Morgan County lost its No. 1

and No. 5.

On the boys’ side, Union County brings back everyone from last year’s squad, along with a few newcomers and 11 freshmen who should make an impact on a team that placed sixth at state.

Junior Oliver Hillman, coming off a seventh-place performance at state, leads the Union men. Others back this year are junior Andrew Nushtayev (35th at state), junior Noah James Payne (50th), sophomore Cole Brown (56th), junior Ander Faulkner (61st), junior Bryson Brooks (65th) and senior Trey Hawley (70th).

Among the top boys’ teams from last year’s state meet, champion East Jackson graduated its No. 1 and No. 5 runners; runner-up KIPP Academy lost its No. 1, No. 2 and No. 5; third-place Crisp County lost its No. 2 and No. 4; and fourth-place Hart County and fifth-place Savannah Arts both graduated their top runner.

Union County opens the year at Tri-County in Murphy, North Carolina, on Saturday, Aug. 23, followed by a home meet at Meeks Park on Thursday, Aug. 28.

“I think both of our teams are going to make the podium (at state),” Dyer said. “Those are our expectations this year — and possibly vying for the top spot.”



Senior Lola Hunter has improved her state finish each year and hopes to bring home Union’s first XC title since 2019.

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Award-Winning UC cheerleaders ready to fire up football season

By Todd Forrest
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With football season kicking off Friday, the Union County cheerleaders are ready to keep Panther fans on their feet and the team fired up — and they're coming in hot after a summer filled with award-winning performances.

Led by captains Khloe Ashcraft and Avery Frechette, who were chosen by their teammates, this year's squad features 36 members between varsity and junior varsity.

"This year the team actually voted on the captains," cheer coach Emily Cobb said. "That's different from years past, when the coaches picked them. We had a large leadership pool this summer and we allowed each one to lead a practice. After that, we held a vote."

The team has been preparing for the fall since early June, practicing three days a week and adding weight room sessions with UCHS strength and conditioning coach Curtis Turner.

"The girls absolutely loved it," Cobb said regarding the team's strength training. "They want to continue it and make it part

of our routine throughout the year. We've definitely gotten stronger, and it's allowed us to be more advanced with our stunting than we've been in the past."

Union County's varsity cheerleading squad turned in a standout performance at Universal Cheerleaders Association camp in LaGrange this summer, capturing three top honors in the large varsity division.

The Panthers won Best Overall Pyramid Formation, Best Overall Tumbling Incorporation and Best Overall Camp Routine, outshining other large varsity teams in multiple categories.

"We're really proud of the work the athletes put in over the summer," Cobb said. "The dedication they showed in practice really paid off at camp."

Several Union County cheerleaders also brought home individual recognition.

Six Panthers received the prestigious "Pin It Forward" award from UCA camp staff, which honors cheerleaders who display leadership, spirit, commitment, kindness and motivation. The 2025 recipients were freshman Brooke Frechette, junior Madison Totherow, sophomore Morgan Montgomery, senior Avery Frechette, junior Matt Starling and senior Lacey Newton.

"The Pin It Forward award is special because it's about character as much as skill," Cobb said. "It says a lot about the kind of people they are, both on and off the mat."

Union County also celebrated six athletes selected as 2025 UCA All-American Cheerleaders, an honor earned through an individual tryout showcasing advanced skills and enthusiasm. All-American cheerleaders have the opportunity to represent their schools at special events and parades across the country.

Union's All-American honorees were juniors Adelyn Cisneros, Matt Starling and Paxton Hamby, along with seniors Avery Frechette, Taylor Costine and Alyana Stringer.

The junior varsity squad also made its mark at camp, earning the Best Sportsmanship award for its positive attitude and encouragement of others. JV was additionally named the Most Improved junior varsity team.

"This is a huge accomplishment for our program," Cobb said. "To have so many of our athletes recognized individually and as teams shows how hard they've been working."

The summer success sets the tone

for the upcoming school year, where both the varsity and JV squads will bring their award-winning routines and team spirit to Panther football games, competitions and community events.

"We're looking at getting more involved during football games," Cobb said. "We're planning a third-quarter takeover with more focus on the cheerleaders and crowd engagement. That's when we'll do more of our stunting because the band usually takes its break then."

The cheer team also plans to boost its social media presence to help the student section and parents get more involved.

"We're looking to have more overall crowd participation this year, not just student-section participation," Cobb said.

Cobb added that the team is still seeking business sponsors for the T-shirts tossed into the crowd during games. The cheer squad will continue to operate its fundraiser concession stand at home games and hopes to partner with local restaurants to offer a wider variety of food options.

In addition, the Panthers will attend the Georgia Gameday competition in December, now that the event has been opened to spirit squads as well as competitive teams.



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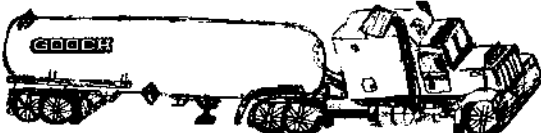
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Union County Marching Band goes 'Stranger' with '80s hits

By Todd Forrest
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Union County's marching band is taking fans on a trip to the "Upside Down" on Friday nights at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium, performing a Stranger Things-themed halftime show packed with '80s classics like Metallica's "Master of Puppets" and Journey's "Separate Ways."

Along with Foreigner's "Hot Blooded" and Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill," UCHS Band Director Will Stafford and sophomore Drum Major Abigail Meyer promise a high-energy performance that blends nostalgia with the Netflix series' suspenseful, otherworldly vibe.

"We're excited to debut our halftime show on Friday night and we hope

everyone enjoys it," Stafford said. "We won't perform the whole show every Friday night, but we'll add a song each week."

Since the end of the 2024-25 school year, the band has been preparing for the coming season. Summer rehearsals included full-band sessions for two weeks — a change from previous years, when the first week was limited to only smaller groups. This allowed the students to focus more intensively on formations, transitions and music precision.

"We tried something a little different this year," Stafford said. "We had been doing two weeks of band camp with the first week a smaller group and the second week the full band. This year, we did two full weeks for the entire band."

The band features 78 members this

year, slightly more than last year and a substantial increase from two years ago. Band members have worked to synchronize complex formations and stunts that complement the theme, creating a visually dynamic halftime experience.

"We're about four or five members larger than last year," Stafford said, "and about 20 members larger than two years ago."

Meyer takes over as drum major for the graduated Leah Cox, marking one of the younger drum majors of Stafford's tenure.

"We have a younger drum major this year with Abigail, but she's doing a really good job," Stafford said.

In one of their final summer events before football season, the band participated in the Georgia Mountain Fair Parade in Hiawassee last weekend.

In October, the band will compete

at Fannin County High School's Blue Ridge Mountain Marching Festival on the 4th, hold its annual fall concert on Oct. 21 at the Union County Fine Arts Center, and perform at the Peach State Marching Competition in Rome on the 25th.

These events give students the opportunity to showcase both the musical and visual elements of their performance.

With football season underway, the band aims to keep the crowd engaged throughout the games, blending classic '80s hits with theatrical flair inspired by Stranger Things.

Panther fans can expect a combination of high-energy music, coordinated visuals and precise formations that highlight the growth and dedication of Union County High School's marching band program.



Union County High School marching band



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