

# Spring

# 2026

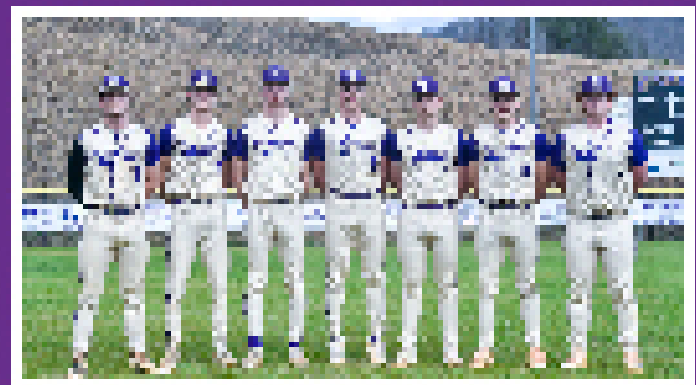


# ATHLETICS

# 2026

Baseball  
Golf  
Soccer

Track and Field



# Seniors

# UNION COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL SPRING SPORTS PREVIEW

# Union County Spring Sports: Early season check-in

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Spring sports are in full swing at Union County with all four teams underway on the diamond, the pitch, the track and the links.

There's been plenty of ups and downs over the first month of spring sports, from the Union County men's soccer team climbing to a No. 1 ranking for just the second time in program history to the baseball team facing adversity after senior ace Gunnar Akins suffered an ankle injury while slipping at home plate.

The track & field team has competed in a few early-season meets as coach Beau Kelley's squad features more than 70 athletes between the boys and girls' teams.

Last but not least, the Union County golf team has high hopes with defending region champ Hayden Price returning for the boys, and three of Union's top four ladies back this season.

**Men's Soccer** – The Panthers are currently 7-1 and ranked No. 2 in Class AA. Unfortunately, the injury bug has bitten in recent weeks as the Panthers and first-year head coach Mark Wade attempt

to navigate a difficult region schedule that still includes Coahulla Creek, along with non-region contests against Lumpkin County, White County and Towns County.

**Women's Soccer** – The young Lady Panthers are without a senior and are led by a talented crop of sophomores and freshmen. But the inexperience hasn't been an issue for Coach Wade as Union County sits at 7-1 and ranked No. 5 in Class AA. Its only loss came in OT to No. 2 Sonoraville, but the Lady Panthers still have tough tests ahead in both region and non-region play.

**Baseball** – After coming within an eyelash of the Sweet 16 last spring, Union County entered the season with high hopes. However, the Panthers have limped to a 5-6 start as region play opened last week. With Akins' season in jeopardy, the Panthers have little time to figure things out in a region that features three ranked teams, plus the defending state champion.

**Track & Field** – Through four meets, the Panthers and Lady Panthers are beginning to get a feel for their strengths and weaknesses. As of now, Union County appears poised to shine in the distance events behind seniors Lola Hunter and Holden Payne.



UCHS soccer seniors Kainen Shirley and Ty Hogsed powered Union County atop the Class AA rankings in early March. Photos by Todd Forrest

The throwing events should be another strength with two returning state placers in senior Leslie Rash (discus) and junior Sofia Foster (shot put).

**Golf** – Both the Panthers and Lady

Panthers return the bulk of their teams and are expected to compete at the state championships. The boys finished seventh at state last spring and are led by defending region champ Hayden Price.

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# Baseball: Senior-heavy Panthers eye postseason run

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Union County enters its region schedule with a roster that blends battle-tested senior leaders with a promising group of younger contributors, giving the Panthers all the pieces necessary to advance in the postseason for the first time since their 2016 Elite Eight appearance.

Unfortunately, the Panthers, who won 18 games a year ago, were dealt a serious blow when senior ace Gunnar Akins suffered an ankle injury in February, sidelining the left-hander until at least April and leaving a hole in both the rotation and the lineup.

Through the first 12 games, the Panthers' offense has been anchored by senior LHP/OF Maddox Patton, who has remained one of the team's most consistent hitters over the past four seasons. He currently leads the team in batting average, OBP, hits, runs, walks and stolen bases. Additionally, his ratio of one strikeout in 42 plate appearances is head and shoulders above the rest of the team.

With Akins sidelined, Patton has

emerged as the top arm in third-year head coach Chris Robbins' rotation. His 36 strikeouts lead the team while sporting a 1.29 ERA in 16 1/3 innings.

Senior IF/RHP Eli Gwynn has been another steady presence in both the lineup and the rotation, owning a team-best 0.78 ERA. At the plate, Gwynn is second on the team with a .414 average, a .561 OBP and 12 runs scored.

Another key offensive contributor has been junior IF/RHP Bentley Rich, who has provided power and run production in the middle of the lineup. Rich's 18 RBIs and four doubles are tops on the team, while his two homers are tied for the team lead.

Senior catcher Bo Brown has also played an important role, both behind the plate and in the batter's box. A four-year starter, Brown's leadership has been valuable for the pitching staff, and he has contributed offensively with key hits and extra-base power, including a home run during a 10-0 victory over Hayesville. The senior backstop owns a .292 average with seven homers. He has also provided some innings on the mound, striking out 10 in eight innings of work.

Another senior providing pop in the lineup is IF/DH Cayden Miller, whose two homers are tied with Rich for the team lead. His 1.319 OPS and .769 SLG lead the team through a dozen games.

Senior Lane Haney has been solid in the leadoff spot and in the outfield, batting .278 with nine runs scored while setting the tone at the top of the lineup.

The Panthers have also received strong production from 1B/LHP Colten Gibson, who is hitting .308 with eight RBIs while providing steady defense on the right side of the infield.

Union County's lineup has also benefited from contributions from junior IF/OF Chetley Cox and his .290 average, 11 RBIs and three doubles.

Sophomore Kamden Kendrick is taking on a bigger role this year in the infield, on the basepaths and on the mound. Used frequently as a courtesy runner, Kendrick has scored 10 runs. He has also doubled and tripled in his 14 plate appearances.

Juniors Karter Conley and Caden Gilliam are two more underclassmen making an impact, taking on larger roles following the injury to Akins. Freshman

Will Hughes is another rising star. He tossed five shutout innings with six strikeouts in a win at Murphy, North Carolina, earlier this month.

Others to watch this spring are sophomores Hudson Collins and Jackson Nichols, both of whom could continue carving out larger roles as the season progresses.

The Panthers will face a tough region slate that features the No. 2 private school in Georgia — North Cobb Christian. Meanwhile, Murray County and North Murray are both ranked in the top 10 in Class AA. Region 7-AA also includes defending state champion Rockmart, making the road through region play one of the toughest challenges on Union County's schedule this spring.

With a senior-heavy squad leading the way, the Panthers have all the tools to return to the postseason, where they will look to end their recent struggles. Last year, Union won a playoff game for the first time since 2016 but couldn't get over the hump, dropping two of three at Stephens County. This year, the question now becomes whether this group can finally take the next step.



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Baseball seniors (L-R): Lane Haney, Maddox Patton, Gunnar Akins, Colten Gibson, Bo Brown, Eli Gwynn, Cayden Miller.

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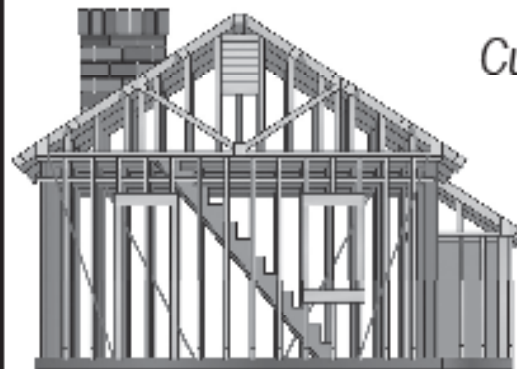


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# Mens soccer: Panthers lean on senior leadership in 2026

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

The Union County men are off to a hot start, winning seven of eight behind a potent offense and a sturdy back line anchored by seniors Kainen Shirley and goalkeeper Cade Walden.

Since 2019, Union County soccer has been among the most successful programs in northeast Georgia. Despite losing a promising 2020 campaign to COVID-19, the Panthers have reached one state championship match, made two Final Four appearances and reached four Elite Eight rounds over the last seven seasons. But after suffering a rare first-round playoff exit last spring, Union County is poised to bounce back in 2026.

The Panthers are also under the direction of first-year head coach Mark Wade, who brings 15 years of experience to the program. Wade served as the head coach at East Hall before coming to Union County as a football assistant in 2021. During his soccer coaching career, he compiled a 149-96-11 record with four region titles, three Elite Eight

appearances, two Final Fours and one state championship game appearance.

He is a four-time Region Coach of the Year, a two-time Area Coach of the Year and the 2021 Hall County Coach of the Year.

Leading Wade's attack is senior Kainen Shirley, who continues to serve as one of Union County's most dangerous offensive weapons. Shirley has been a consistent scoring threat throughout his career and remains the focal point of the Panthers' attack. Even while battling injuries early this season, Shirley returned to deliver a late game-winner against Sonoraville.

Union County has also received offensive production from senior Ty Hogsed, junior Ander Faulkner and sophomore Brayden Torres. Their ability to push the ball forward on the wing has helped the Panthers stretch opposing defenses and create scoring opportunities.

Midfield play remains another strength for Union County. Chris Robinson has provided steady production while helping control possession and dictate tempo in the middle of the field.

Senior three-year starter Matthew

Ortiz has also been a key contributor in the midfield. Ortiz brings experience and composure to Union County's starting 11 and has played an important role in helping generate scoring chances.

Others who have contributed offensively this season include freshmen Jordan Cooper and Owen Wimpey-Fletes, sophomore Cody Dupuis, junior Elijah Studebaker and senior Jonah Munoz.

Defensively, Union County has relied heavily on Walden, who has turned in several strong performances between the posts. Walden has recorded multiple clean sheets and has proven especially valuable in high-pressure situations, including two penalty-shootout wins earlier this season.

Senior defender Isaiah Landau-Figueroa has emerged this spring, adding speed and physicality to Union's back line. Combined with senior Salvador Morales and junior Rob Thompson, the Panthers' defense has the potential to be one of the stingiest units in a deep Region 7-AA.

If the Panthers can navigate their early-season injuries, they appear to have the pieces in place to make another

deep postseason run and continue the program's success of the past several seasons.



Head coach Mark Wade

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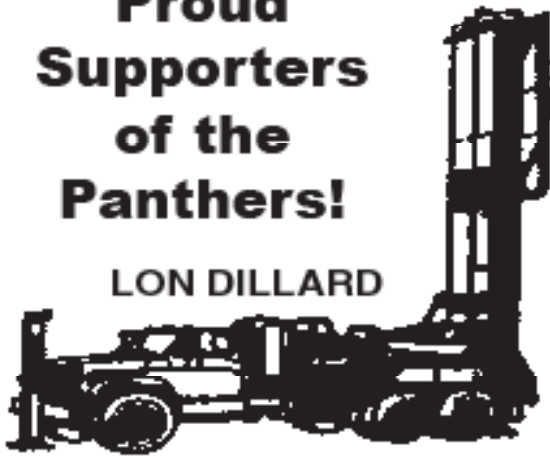
Union County men and women soccer seniors: Salvador Morales, Jonah Munoz, Ty Hogsed, Cade Walden, Kainen Shirley, Matthew Ortiz, Lexi Krauss (manager)

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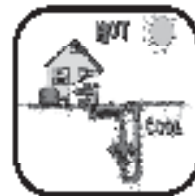
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# Women's soccer: Young UC squad primed for breakthrough

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Union County women's soccer enters the season with a talented young crop of players that have the future looking extremely bright on the pitch of Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

The Lady Panthers have never advanced beyond the Elite Eight, but with a top-five ranking and a 7-1 start, Union County is primed to make history under first-year coach Mark Wade.

For the first time in more than two-and-a-half decades, coach Tim Hunter won't be on the Union County sidelines, but he left Wade plenty of weapons from last year's 7-7 squad that was made up mostly of freshmen and sophomores.

The Lady Panthers have added another deep freshman class in 2026, but much of Union County's scoring production begins with sophomore Destiny Hill, who has quickly established herself as one of the most dangerous attackers in the region.

Hill's ability to beat defenders off the dribble and finish has made her a constant threat. Her five-goal performance

earlier this season marked the program's top individual outing in seven years.

Sophomore midfielder Stella Collins has emerged as another important piece of Union County's attack. Serving as her team's field general, Collins has the ability to score from anywhere on the field and create chances in transition, making her one of the Lady Panthers' most versatile offensive threats. Her scoring ability has already played a key role in several of Union County's biggest matches this season, most notably her late equalizer from distance against No. 2 Sonoraville.

Union County has also received valuable contributions from freshman Clara Davis, whose speed and aggressive attacking style have helped create scoring chances.

Strong-legged freshman Lennon Ellis has also made an immediate impact for Union County, especially during the month of March.

Sophomores Addie Ortiz and Claire Ford, along with freshman Reese Oakley, have also been key offensive contributors this season, despite Ortiz missing time due to an illness in late February and early March.

Defensively, Union has leaned on freshman goalkeeper Naomi Ford, while sophomore Madelyn Mathis has also seen time in goal this season. Both keepers have recorded saves throughout the early portion of the schedule and have helped secure several shutouts.

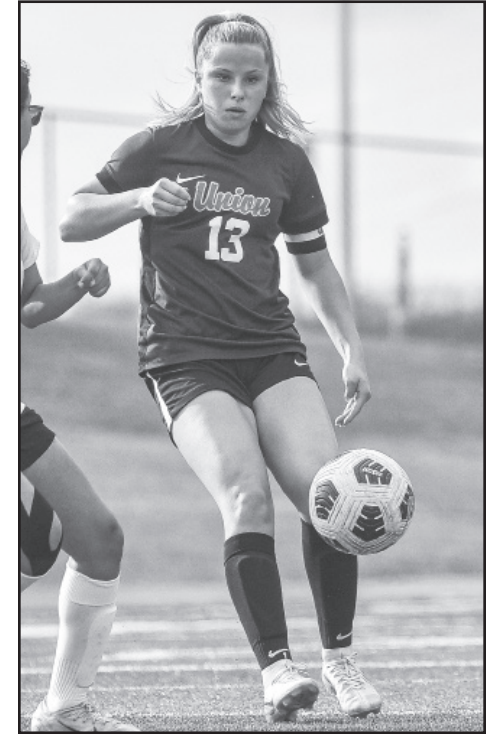
Union's veteran leaders, juniors Abby Gilley and Emmy Kight, have led a Union County defense that surrendered just six goals over the first eight matches. Freshman Kelsey Wallace has also proven valuable on the back line during the first month of the season.

Others to keep an eye on this season include sophomores Yazmin Hernandez, Sophia Miller, Macy Payne, Bailey Pierce, Gabby Perez and Addison Rutan, among others.

With a balanced combination of scoring power, speed and defensive depth, the Lady Panthers have the tools to remain one of the top teams in Class AA. If their young core continues to develop and the offense maintains its scoring pace, Union County will be well positioned to challenge for a deep postseason run this season and for years to come.

The Lady Panthers' only loss of

the year came in overtime to No. 2 Sonoraville, but at 7-1, Union County is squarely in the driver's seat for its first home playoff game in four years.



Sophomore Stella Collins

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# Track-and-Field: Union County returns podium contenders

By Todd Forrest  
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Union County track and field lost several key contributors from a year ago but enters the 2026 season with a deep roster featuring several returning athletes who have already proven capable of reaching the podium.

Leading the way for the Lady Panthers is long-distance runner Lola Hunter, a multiple-time state placer in the 3200-meter event who finished third in last year's meet. She has also competed at 1600M and 800M during the early outings of 2026.

Junior Sofia Foster is also back after placing fourth in Class AA in the shot put last spring. Additionally, Leslie Rash, who finished seventh at state in the discus in 2025, gives the Panthers a strong presence in both the shot put and discus.

Senior Holden Payne is making the jump to track after placing second at the Class AA state cross country meet, providing Union County's boys team with a state contender in the long-distance events.

Gracie Miller, one of the team's most versatile competitors, finished among the top five in multiple events at last year's region meet. This year, Miller has been a consistent presence, particularly in the hurdles and field events. She returns as a key contributor in the 100-meter hurdles, 300-meter hurdles, high jump and triple jump.

Union County will also look to Ava Klein, who provides the Panthers with speed in the sprint events. Klein has already established herself as one of the team's top performers in the 100M and 200M dashes, finishing second in the 200M at last year's Region 7-AA meet.

The Panthers also feature a strong group of athletes capable of contributing across several events. Samantha Combs will compete in the 400M dash, while Sara Patterson and Ragan McCarter provide additional depth in the hurdles. Emry Sosensky adds another threat in the high jump, while Abby Barrett will look to make an impact in the triple jump after finishing fourth at last year's region meet.

Depth will also play an important role for the Lady Panthers as the season progresses. Athletes such as Miya

Totherow, Livia Haney, Avery Hussion, Averie Tanner and Kate Barrett provide Union County with additional options across the sprint, distance and field events.

On the boys' side, the Panthers return a number of athletes who have already produced strong results early in the season.

Coming off a top-three finish at region in 2025, Cole Brown highlights the sprint group after delivering strong performances in the 400M dash, while Christian Mullin brings versatility to the team with the ability to contribute in both the 400M and the long and triple jumps.

Freshman Jayelen Howard is emerging as one of Union County's top field-event athletes after posting strong marks in the high jump, while Ethan Hogsed also provides depth in the event.

Union County's distance group includes Arthur Bowman and Noah James Payne, who have already delivered solid performances in the 800M, 1600M and 3200M runs.

The Panthers also feature a strong group of sprinters, including Haze Burnett, Nickolai Gromowa and Sean Rosa, who provide depth in the short

sprints while also contributing to Union County's relay teams.

Relays are expected to remain a strength for the Panthers, with Union County consistently fielding competitive teams in the 4x100, 4x200, 4x400 and 4x800 relays.



Junior Sofia Foster

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Track & field 2026 seniors (L-R): Averie Tanner, Holden Payne, Leslie Rash, Nickolai Gromowa, Lola Hunter, Trey Hawley, Abby Barrett, Wade Williams, Sara Patterson, Avery Hussion, Thomas Gary.

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03/05	Gilmer Home #1	Jasper
03/07	Currahee Relays	Toccoa
03/10	North Hall Quad Meet	Gainesville
03/13	Battle of the Blue Ridge	Mt. Airy
<b>03/19</b>	<b>Mountain Top Invitational</b>	<b>Blairsville (HOME)</b>
03/26	Pickens Home Meet 2	Jasper
04/02	Mt. Yonah Invitational	Cleveland
04/16	Dawson HS Tri Meet   Sr Night	Dawsonville



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# Union County golf teams tee up another run at State

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Coming off a seventh-place finish at the Class AA State Championships, Union County men's golf returns a seasoned lineup and plenty of optimism heading into the 2026 season.

Leading the way is junior Hayden Price, who won Region 7-AA and finished 11th overall at the 2025 state championships.

Along with Price, the Panthers return senior Jonah Licavoli (39th at state), junior Will Henson (50th) and junior Grant Smith (55th), providing second-year head coach Brandon Bradburn a strong top four to build around this spring.

With Price entering as Union's clear No. 1, Bradburn believes he may also have a solid No. 2 in Henson, who has already earned low medalist honors in Union County's only match of the season, firing a 39 at Chatuge Shores.

"(Henson) is well on his way to being a force to be reckoned with," Bradburn said.

As for Licavoli and Smith, Brad-

burn is pleased with their continued progress.

"Jonah Licavoli, who is transitioning from baseball to golf, has to be our most improved player who came on strong last year and is miles ahead of where he started last season.

"Grant Smith has steadily improved from last year to this, qualifying for a spot in both our area and state matches last year as a sophomore. The sky's the limit for him."

Junior Parker Deal also returns to the team, along with three newcomers: senior Matthew Ekberg and freshmen Braxton Miller and Izaac Sewell.

"These guys are putting in the work," Bradburn said. "They will be expected to contribute this season and complement a well-experienced and talented group."

On the girls side, Union County is led by three seniors: Sofia Charbonneau, Peyton Grisham and Delaney Moses.

The Lady Panthers missed out on state last year when they were unable to field a full squad at the region match. But when at full strength, Charbonneau has the ability to compete for individual low medalist honors each round and keep her

team in the hunt.

"Charbonneau was the low medalist in almost every event last year and she looks to continue her stellar golf throughout her senior season," Bradburn said.

Meanwhile, Grisham and Moses are in their second year of golf and Bradburn is expecting a breakout season from both.

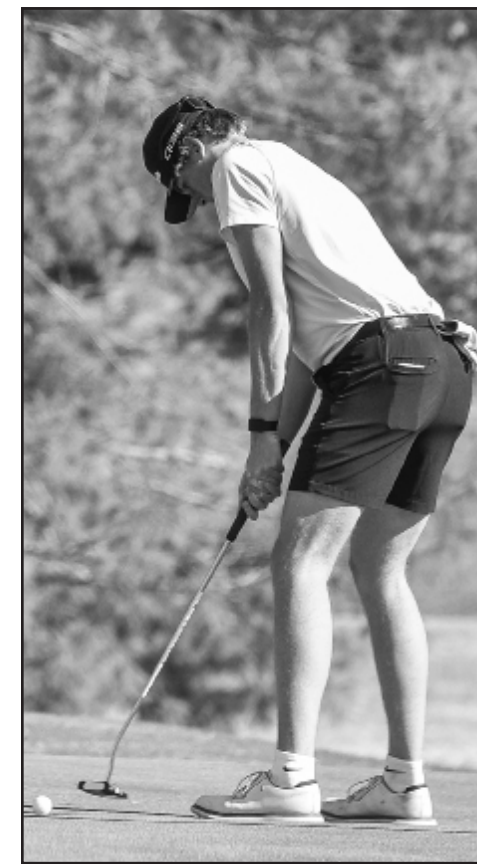
"Moses and Grisham were new to the scene last year," he said. "But they have improved tremendously from last year to this year, and I expect both of them to have big senior years."

Other golfers who could have an impact this season are junior Maddie Meeker and freshman Ella Fisk.

"They are very talented with a lot of natural golf ability and skill," Bradburn said. "I expect both of them to be big-time contributors this season as well as leaders for next year."


Union County plays its home matches at Butternut Creek and Old Union Golf Course. The next home match is at Old Union on March 19.

Union also hosts matches at Butternut Creek on March 24 and at Old Union on March 30 and April 20. The regular season concludes at Butternut Creek on April 21 and April 29.



Hayden Price

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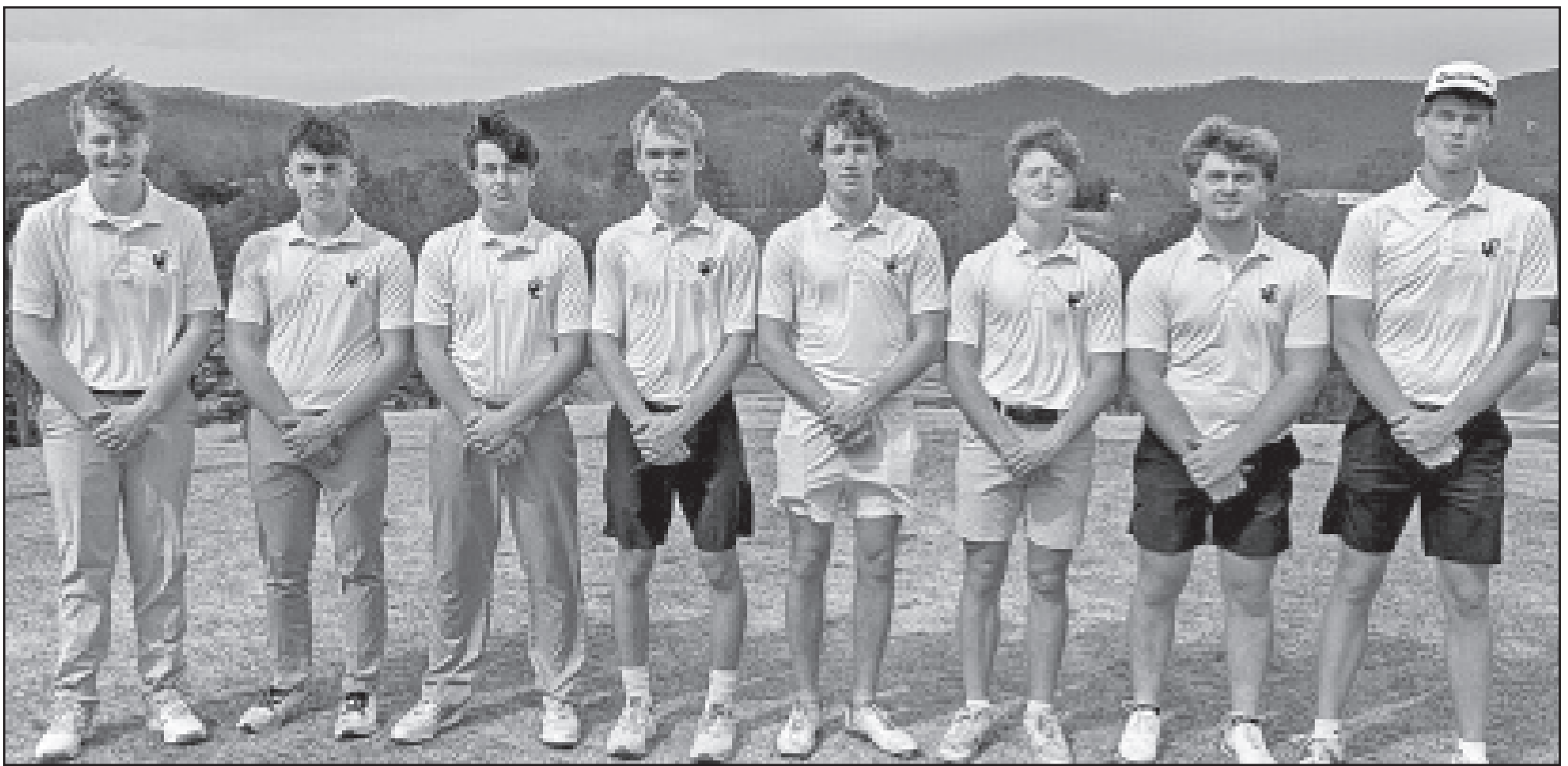
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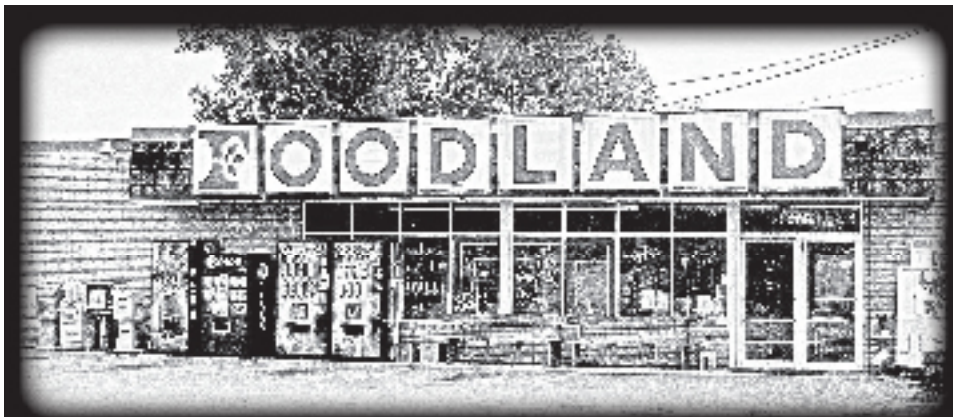
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Union County boys golf (L-R): Matthew Ekeberg, Braxton Miller, Izaac Sewell, Parker Deal, Jonah Licavoli, Grant Smith, Will Henson, Hayden Price.



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Union County girls golf (L-R): Ella Fisk, Sofia Charbonneau, Peyton Grisham, Delaney Moses, Maddie Meeker.

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# Panthers



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## 2026 GOLF SCHEDULE

DATE	OPPONENT	LOCATION	TIME
3/3	Towns (Boys Only)	Chatuge Shores	3:15PM
3/16	LFO	Butternut Creek	3:30PM
3/17	Towns (Boys Only)	Butternut Creek	3:30PM
3/19	Pickens	Old Union	3:30PM
3/21	Tournament (Boys)	Apple Mountain	8:30AM
3/24	Rabun/Habersham*	Butternut Creek	3:30PM
3/26	Fannin	Old Toccoa Farm	3:30PM
3/30	Dawson (Girls Only)	Old Union	3:30PM
3/31	Gilmer	Whitepath	3:30PM
4/13	LFO	Windstone	3:15PM
4/14	Pickens	Bent Tree	3:15PM
4/16	Rabun	King Wood	3:30PM
4/20	Fannin	Old Union	3:30PM
4/21	Gilmer/Maca*	Butternut Creek	3:30PM
4/29	Dawson (Girls Only)	Butternut Creek	3:30PM

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# GO PANTHERS!

-Proverbs 4:12

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