

Towns County Sports

Towns County's Leader In Sports

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Towns County's early season struggles continue at Union County

By Mason Mitcham
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Staff Writer

Blairsville - The year may be slowly looking up for Towns County High School Football, if the performance of last Friday's game is any indicator.

Rivals Union County took the advantage early, and steadily built on their lead throughout all four quarters, but Towns managed to turn the direction of the game around in the final few minutes. With two touchdowns in rapid succession, the Indians may have hit their stride for the rest of the season.

Despite Towns County football's 2012 record, the community consistently turns out in force every Friday night. This might was no different.

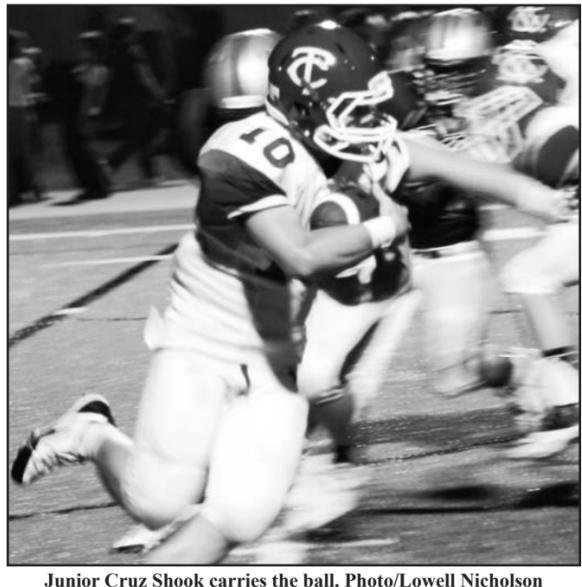
It was a pleasant evening, but the atmosphere held the slight, anticipatory tinge of expectation. Much of the expectation may center on new head coach Blair Harrison, who left his job at Kingston, Tenn. to work at Towns County. If Harrison, who has been coaching for 20 years, senses any pressure whatsoever, he doesn't show it. His manner is brusque and focused, from the inauspicious beginning of the game to the exciting end.

It didn't take long for an aggressive Union County offense to score. There was still 9:11 left in the first quarter as they scored their first touchdown and extra point. They scored again quickly in the first quarter, and then, building on their rapid momentum, scored once again.

The scoreboard showed 21-0 at the beginning of the second. The second quarter did



Coach Harrison and his staff discuss strategy with the Indians during a break in the action. Photo/Lowell Nicholson



Junior Cruz Shook carries the ball. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

not improve matters for Towns. The score rose to 31-0.

In the third quarter, it rose again; the beginning of the fourth saw Union County

leading with a devastating 34-0 margin.

That was when a battered and weary Towns County picked itself up and, after a bitter fight



Senior quarterback Jackson Noblet looks down field for a receiver in the first quarter. Photo/Lowell Nicholson



Senior Evan Keyes leads a gang tackle. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

for the last 20 yards, forced the ball through Union County lines for a hard-earned touchdown, scored by Jackson Noblet. With 5:53 left on the clock, kicker

Shea Underwood made the point after, bringing the score to 34-7.

Union County scored again immediately afterward



Brett Barrett on a 92-yard kickoff return, strengthening their lead to 41-7 with 5:39 to play.

But the Indian offense wasn't done yet. Just after Union scored, freshman running back Kobe Denton ran the ball approximately 80 yards for another Towns County touchdown with 4:25 left in the fourth quarter. Underwood's kick was good, bringing the final score to 41-14.

It appeared that Towns County started playing with more aggression during not only the fourth quarter, but during the second half altogether.

"It took us a while to get going," Harrison admitted after the game. "We made some defensive adjustments at halftime, and we started getting some blocks, we just executed better in the second half."

Whether Towns will continue to execute aggressive plays like those they made against Union in the fourth quarter remains to be seen. Next Friday, they square off at home against Fellowship Christian Academy at 7:30 p.m.

TCMS ignoring scoreboard; will improve

By Mason Mitcham
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Staff Writer

Coach Chris Vardo knows that the only way for the young Towns County Indians to get better as a football team is to face off against tough competition.

That's one positive he can take away from their defeat at the hands of the Rabun County Wildcats.

"They're a good ball club," Vardo says matter-of-factly of the AA-class school. "They're a good ball club, and well-coached." But, he stresses, win or loss, Towns County Middle School football is always striving to improve.

The night was a tough one for Vardo's athletes. It ended with a score of 46-6 in favor of Rabun County, although some players stepped up noticeably. Blane Rogers scored the touchdown. Vardo noted that Dakota Edge did well, as well as quarterback Trent Bradshaw.

"Bradshaw got a little banged up, and played through it. I think mentally, for a first-year quarterback, that's important. Overall, we can take this as a lesson," he says. "We did some things better this week than we did last week." Though last week's hard-fought loss against South Habersham could have been dispiriting, the young athletes picked themselves up,



TCMS punches it in the endzone vs Rabun. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

trained hard, and returned to the field ready to play football. "We had more guys play more quarters," Vardo said. They played hard, with intensity. You can work with that."

It's no secret that athletes playing contact sports must be fit, strong, and tough enough to handle the physical demands of the game. But the mental aspect is equally important; athletes often are beaten mentally before they are beaten physically. Vardo can remain proud that his team continued to be psychologically tough in the face of a losing game. "They came out and played hard," he said. "They

finished. They're not quitters. And that speaks to the character of the kids."

Although the Indians played with plenty of heart and persistence, Vardo plans to continue to make improvements. "We're really going to focus on blocking," he said. "Backfield, we need to be a little sharper. Defensively, we've got to be able to make open-field tackles. And we've got to be physical. We've got to play football." It's a safe bet that Vardo and his young athletes will be working hard this week, preparing to travel to face off against Lakeview Middle School next Thursday.

Cross Country opens at Meeks Park

By Mason Mitcham
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Staff Writer

Blairsville - Coach Jeanie Ledford isn't content with mediocrity. Nor should she be.

Her Towns County Girls cross-country team took home the Class A Public School State Title last year. Ledford, a self-proclaimed "superstitious" sort, politely refuses to make claims about whether or not they will repeat state. It's a safe bet, however, that she and her runners will be working hard together to do as well as they can this season, and that might be very well indeed.

In addition to Towns, the cross-country meet on Thursday featured Union County, Hayesville NC, Murphy NC, Lumpkin County, and Chatahoochee high schools. The girls' teams ran first, followed immediately by the boys.

Towns County's senior runner Ansley Vardeman finished in the Top 10 at 24:02, and the first boy across the line was Tyler Grimsley at 21:35.

Thomas Mitchell, Marshall Ledford, Cesar Bustamante, senior Chase Davenport, and Hank Chambers rounded out the Top seven.

Ansley Vardeman was followed by senior Caitlyn Sheffield, Taylor Vardeman, Ally Settles, Samantha Quijada, and



Ansley Vardeman

Rosa-Jane Clinton.

Towns finished sixth out of multiple teams. It's important to note, however, that the teams they competed against are teams they will not see at the area meet. Coach Ledford picked the schedule to get the best out of her runners.

"I put them in the most difficult schedule against phenomenal runners that I can," she admits. "Our neighbors here at Union and the Smoky Mountain Conference are so strong that when we train with them, that when it comes to the area championship, that we have capitalized on that, and it gives us that edge."

The philosophy of racing every race as hard as you can seems to be one Ledford embraces wholeheartedly. Seemingly oblivious to the spectators



Tyler Grimsley

and other coaches, she put herself at the fore of the crowd, her shouted instructions audible even over the cheering audience as each of her runners closed on the finish line. It was evident that she demanded their absolute best, and equally evident that they were willing to give it.

"The biggest thing is not getting ahead of yourself," she said modestly. "You have a goal, and that goal is to make it to state. You race every race like it's a state championship. You practice every practice like you're practicing for a state championship. And then the simplest thing: you just go run. You bring me that, and we'll go to work. That's what we do. We go to work." She pauses. "And," she adds, just to drive the point home, "they're my family."

Lady Indians fall to Athens Christian, take Rabun down to the wire

By Mason Mitcham
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The Towns County Lady Indians' softball team seemed focused on Tuesday as they stepped onto the diamond against the Athens Christian Lady Eagles.

The Lady Indians brought up nine freshmen this year, but not one of the newcomers exhibited the slightest trace of fear, even against formidable Eagles' pitcher Cheyenne Pridgen. While they waited in the dugout, the older kids could be heard exchanging advice, and quick, potentially game-changing information with the freshmen and with each other.

Despite having a young team, the Lady Indians fought hard against Athens Christian. The Lady Eagles pulled ahead by two runs early in the first inning, but got no further until the fourth. This was in part because of watchful defense in both the infield and outfield, and in part because of good work by starting pitcher Emily Ledford.

The second inning saw Ledford on the mound for no more than five minutes before she got her third strikeout.

However, the fourth inning was fortuitous for the Lady Eagles. Despite defensive efforts from Towns County,



Towns County gets a Lady Wildcat gets caught in a rundown. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

Athens Christian slowly filled the bases and pushed their way home, bringing the score from 2-0 to 5-0. Here is where Towns began to make mistakes, little errors like dropped balls. The little mistakes were enough to push the game in favor of Athens Christian. Having stolen the momentum, the Eagles grew more and more confident over the next several innings, eventually finishing with a score of 10-0.

The number of the score does seem hopelessly uneven, but the outcome of the game rested on just a few simple mis-

takes from which Athens Christian would not let the Indians recover. When asked about the loss, Coach Jessica Berrong's response was simple. "Errors," she said. "We had some outfield errors. And a couple of little mistakes add up."

Nevertheless, she remains focused. "After a game, we think about what to work on. We fix it. And then we move past. We brush it off." Her philosophy of taking it one day at a time may be especially helpful to such a freshman-heavy team. "It's exciting to have a fresh team, but they're going to real-



Tori Morgan patrols the infield as Emily Ledford fires home. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

ize they aren't playing middle school ball anymore," she said. While she's excited about the entire team, Berrong added that in addition to veterans Emily Ledford and Tori Morgan, some hopefuls to watch are Jordan Gurley and Alyssa Pyle.

Is that kind of one-sided defeat likely to happen again this season? Not likely.

"We take games like that at we use them to work on," Coach Berrong said, with a bright, optimistic grin.

Rabun County in an intense, close game that could have gone either way. Rabun pulled ahead by two runs early on. Though Towns kept the pressure on, and tightened up their defense noticeably from the previous day, they were unable to catch up. The game ended with a score of 8-6.

Again, Ledford stood out. Fans could be overheard commenting on the starting pitcher's look of intense focus as she took the mound. But she wasn't alone. Leanne Dean stepped up noticeably as a hitter. Coach Berrong also noted

that Alyson Nelson played well, saying, "She's improved greatly from the beginning of the year. That really helps us out."

An interesting and often-overlooked aspect of Towns County Softball is that they often play games back-to-back-to-back. They played ball from Tuesday to Thursday. Tired or not, they often have to use the games themselves as impromptu practices. This is as system the athletes are obviously used to, since they improved noticeably in the time between their games against Athens Christian and Rabun.

"We had a few girls who wanted to step up. And they hit," Berrong emphasized. "We had a few girls who wanted to make the plays. So we were much more pleased with today's effort. Even our base running. They were being aggressive. We would much more prefer to work with an over-aggressive base runner than a timid one who's not willing to take that next step."

"We didn't quit today," she added. "Today, they had a lot more pride in them."

It may benefit the softball team to take the weekend to rest up, ice their throwing arms, and keep themselves sharp. Coach Berrong and her athletes will face Providence Christian at home on Sept 3rd.