

# Sports

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## No. 7 Panthers roll to nine-straight wins

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The 7th-ranked Union County men continue surging, pushing their winning streak to nine ahead of Tuesday's heavyweight region showdown at Banks County.

After closing out 2023 by running the table at Towns County's Battle of the States Christmas Tournament (BOTS), the Panthers opened 2024 with a No. 8 ranking and a 64-60 home victory over the Class AA State Runner-up Providence Christian Academy on Tuesday, Jan. 2.

Later in the week, Union County improved to 2-0 in region play, never trailing in an 81-71 victory over an 11-2 Athens Academy squad on Friday, Jan. 5, propelling the Panthers to 7th in the latest Class AA state rankings.

"This little run that we've been on, I think, can be traced back to the second half of the game at Murphy," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "I'm not saying we've turned it on and are playing our best, but I think that second half at Murphy changed things. We look like we're playing with more energy on defense and trusting the system."

Last month, Union County won its fourth Battle of the States Christmas Tournament and its first since 2010 with a 75-59 victory over Rabun County on Saturday, Dec. 30.

After winning three titles between 2000-2010, the Panthers were denied a finals berth over the next eight tournaments. However, Union's previous two entries into the BOTS resulted in runner-up finishes, falling to Towns in 2019 and Rabun County in 2022.

But the third time was the charm for Union County head coach Corey Garrett, the tournament MVP on the Panthers' 2006 BOTS championship squad before taking the reins of his alma mater in 2019.

Union County reached the 2023 finals with victories over Franklin, North Carolina and Murphy, North Carolina, setting up the third meeting in six weeks with Rabun County.

Junior Houston Henry earned the Jerry Kendall Most Valuable Player award, averaging 20.7 points, 5 assists, 4 steals and 4 rebounds over the three games. Juniors Jude Ellis and Hayden Hughes earned All-Tournament Team nods, with Ellis pouring in 14 points a night along with 7 rebounds and 3 assists. Hughes averaged 13.3 points, 3 rebounds, 3 steals and 2 assists.

"This [BOTS championship] feels really good, especially after last year when we lost to Rabun," Henry said. "Beating them in the championship will hopefully send us into region on the right foot."

**No. 8 Panthers 81, Athens Academy 71** - Tied at 23 in the second quarter, Union County pulled away via an 18-9 stretch to close the half and were never threatened after the intermission.

The Panthers built third-quarter leads of 55-40 and 57-42 before closing the period up 65-48. Union maintained a comfortable 79-65 advantage near the 2-minute mark when Henry went to the bench with five fouls. From there, the Spartans trimmed the deficit to 80-71 during the final seconds before an Ellis free throw concluded the scoring.

Henry led all scorers



Union County won its fourth Battle of the States Christmas Tournament on Saturday, Dec. 30 at Towns County High School. The Panthers defeated Rabun County, Murphy, NC and Franklin, NC to claim its first BOTS title since 2010. Photo/Todd Forrest

with 20 points, 6 assists, 4 rebounds and 2 steals. Ellis had 18 points and 2 assists on a season-high four 3-pointers. Dockrey matched his season-high with 15 points to go with 4 rebounds, 3 assists and 2 steals.

Hughes provided 10 points, 6 boards and a block; Totherow had 10 points and 5 rebounds; Combs added 8 points, 9 rebounds and 2 steals; Hogsdesh dished out one assist.

Athens Academy's Kymel Williams had 19 points and 11 rebounds. Justin Goude-lock had 17 points and 14 boards.

**Game stats:** Union hit 42% (26-62) from the field, 71% (22-31) at the line and 35% (7-20) from behind the arc. The Spartans connected on 45% (27-60) of its attempts, 83% (15-18) of its free throws and 13% (2-16) from downtown.

The rebounds were even at 35; Athens outscored Union 48-38 in the paint. The Spartans turned it over 16 times; Union finished with 12 turnovers.

**No. 8 Panthers 64, Providence Christian Academy 60** - In a rematch of last year's 8-AA title game, Union County led the entire second half until the Storm's late push tied the score at 60-60 with just over 2 minutes to play.

Ellis scored the contest's last 4 points, including the go-ahead bucket with under 30 seconds left, followed by two game-clinching free throws in the final seconds.

Earlier, Ellis' baseline drive spotted the Panthers a 60-55 lead with 3:40 to play, but Union would go scoreless over the next 3 minutes as Providence knotted the score at the 2:17 mark. But both offenses traded misses until the Panthers regained possession with 48 seconds left.

Looking for an opening on the perimeter, Hughes dished to Ellis, who drove left and converted a leaning, back-handed layup with 29 seconds remaining.

Afterward, Ellis broke down his go-ahead bucket.

"When I caught the ball, [the defender] was playing my right foot because I had been driving right all game," he said. "That was something we talked about in practice the day before, so it was kind of a no-brainer, I drove left and got inside and scored."

Following a Storm

timeout, Providence's Samuel Thacker, the reigning 8-AA Co-Player of the Year, split two defenders on a drive into the paint, where his floater caromed off the back iron and into the arms of Ellis with 4 seconds left.

Ellis proceeded to sink two free throws, putting the finishing touches on a thrilling Region 8-AA opener.

"We knew we could score with them, but we came in with a solid defensive plan and the guys executed," Garrett said.

Ellis turned in a season-high 22 points on 9-of-16 shooting and 2-of-4 from 3-point range. Henry just missed a triple-double, finishing with 21 points, 9 rebounds, 8 assists and 2 steals.

Hughes had 10 points, 9 rebounds and 2 assists; Dockrey chipped in 4 points, 6 boards and 3 steals; Combs added 4 points, 6 rebounds and 2 blocks; Totherow finished with 3 points and a rebound.

Thacker went for 18 points, 5 rebounds and 4 assists in the loss.

Trailing 8-6 in the early going, Union County closed the first with a 14-5 run, but Providence answered with a 20-7 stretch to start the second, racing ahead 33-27.

Sparking Providence's second-quarter surge was three consecutive treys by Jaylon Seymour, who finished with a team-high 20 points. The Storm sank nine 3-pointers in the first half, but Union County entered the break up 36-35, courtesy of a 6-0 spurt over the final minute.

The Panthers started the third with six straight to mount a 42-35 advantage. Union maintained its 7-point edge for much of the third, holding leads of 44-37, 46-39, 48-41 and 50-43, until Providence closed within 54-51 entering the fourth.

The Panthers' final 7-point margin came at 58-51, courtesy of Ellis and Hughes. A Union County turnover at the 5-minute mark ignited the Storm's 9-2 spurt, tying the score at 60-60.

"We had a couple bad possessions toward the end that allowed them to tie it up, so we should have never really been in that situation," Garrett said.

**Game stats:** Union County shot 43% (26-61) from the field, 89% (8-9) at the line and 22% (4-18) from deep. Providence hit 38% (23-61) from the field, 75% (3-4) at the

charity stripe and 39% (11-28) from long distance.

Union controlled the boards (42-28) and the paint (42-22), but Providence won the turnover battle 16-13.

**Panthers 75, Rabun County 59 (BOTS finals)** - Union County never trailed, jumping out to a 14-6 lead after one en route to a 48-28 third-quarter margin.

"We didn't play our best in last year's [BOTS championship loss to Rabun], so that was a game we really wanted," Garrett said.

Rabun County narrowed the gap to 60-54 during the fourth until an 8-0 swing in a matter of seconds provided the Panthers a 14-point cushion without a Rabun possession.

With his team nursing a 6-point lead in the final minutes, Ellis attacked the basket, drawing a foul on the bucket and prompting a Wildcats' technical foul out of frustration.

Ellis completed the and-1, then knocked down both technical free throws. With Union regaining possession after the tech, Hughes put the game away with a corner-3, finalizing the 8-0 run that spanned less than 10 seconds of game time and awarded the Panthers a 68-54 lead.

Henry finished with 22 points, 6 steals, 5 assists and 3 rebounds on 7-of-13 shooting. Ellis also went 7 of 13 from the floor, scoring 18 points with 7 boards, 5 assists and 2 steals. Hughes added 18 points, 5 assists and 4 steals for a Union County team that shot 53% (29-55) on the night.

"Our defense is what made our offense go," Garrett said. "That was pretty much the story of that game."

Henry added, "We were able to force some turnovers and that sparked our offense. Then our bench guys made some plays and that was a big reason for the win."

The Panthers raced out to a 10-2 lead, eventually pulling away at 20-10, 30-14 and 37-21 at the break.

Union County opened up a 20-point advantage in the third, but Rabun outscored the Panthers 16-7 to close the period at 55-44. Union held a 60-46 lead during the fourth until 8-straight Rabun points sliced the margin to six.

Junior Kaden Combs finished with 6 points and 2

boards; sophomore Cade Dockrey had 4 points, 6 rebounds, 4 assists, 2 steals and a block; freshman Jaxon Totherow ended with 4 points, 2 steals and a rebound.

Junior Brayden Hogsdesh knocked down a trey to finish with 3 points.

**Game stats:** Union hit 12 of 18 (67%) at the line and 5 of 19 (26%) from downtown. Rabun made 45% (25-56) of its field goal attempts, 75% (3-4) at the charity stripe and 26% (6-23) from long distance.

The Wildcats out-rebounded Union County 36-21 overall and 12-2 on the offensive glass, but the Panthers outscored Rabun 44-36 in the paint and forced 23 turnovers while only committing nine.

**Panthers 45, Murphy, NC 41** - After splitting the two previous meetings vs Murphy, the Panthers survived a low-scoring physical contest vs. the Bulldogs during the BOTS semifinals.

"[Murphy's] length gives us trouble, but I think we found something with our [defense] when we beat them over there," Garrett said. "The last two meetings, we've been able to turn them over and get some deflections and steals. So I think it was our effort that got us through."

In the rubber match between the two programs, Union County denied Murphy's late push after turning a 19-18 halftime edge into a 36-27 advantage late in the third.

Hughes' 3 early in the fourth accounted for half of his team's two field goals during the final frame. However, the trey resulted in a debatable Union technical foul when Hughes pointed at his celebrating teammates on the bench.

Murphy split the two free

throws, then added two more on the ensuing possession to move within 39-35. Two Henry free throws pushed the lead back to six ahead of the Bulldogs' rally.

Consecutive inside buckets by Murphy's Zach Skogen trimmed the difference to 43-41 with under a minute to play. Hughes misfired from 3-point range on the other end, but Murphy's trey attempt out of the timeout was corralled by Dockrey along the baseline.

The final seconds weren't without controversy as Murphy swiped Union's inbounds pass and sank the would-be game-tying bucket, but the Bulldogs were tagged with a foul on the steal as Henry went to the floor trying to gather the loose ball, negating the basket.

Still inbound from under their own basket, the Panthers put the game away with a full-court pass to Dockrey for a game-clinching layup.

Henry finished with 16 points, 5 assists, 4 rebounds and 3 steals. Ellis had 13 points, 10 rebounds and 2 steals. Hughes chipped in 9 points and 3 boards; Combs had 4 points and 7 rebounds; Dockrey added 3 points and 3 steals; Totherow finished with 4 boards.

**Game stats:** Union County hit 27% (13-49) of its shots and went 6 for 22 (27%) from 3-point range, but won the game at the line, shooting a 93% clip on 13 of 14. Murphy went 16 of 48 (33%) from the field, 4 for 20 (20%) from deep and 5 of 10 (50%) at the line.

Murphy out-rebounded Union County 35-32 and outscored the Panthers 22-12 in the paint. Union County committed 13 turnovers and forced 16.

**Panthers 70, Franklin, NC 66** - Game details and stats are available in the Jan. 3 edition of the *North Georgia News*.

**Up next:** Union County travels to Banks County on Tuesday in a meeting of the only two remaining unbeaten teams in region play. Although, Homer has become a house of horrors for Union County basketball in recent years, with Union's last victory at Banks coming in 2012.

Last year's visit to Homer saw the Leopards shoot 16 for 29 (55%) from 3-point range in an 89-62 rout of Union. Since 2018, the Panthers' trips to Banks County have resulted in a 23-point average margin of defeat, with the closest contest a 68-61 loss two years ago.

Even in Union's narrow 2022 loss, the Leopards shot 50% from the floor, 56% from 3-point range and 94% at the line while jumping out to a 32-17 lead before the Panthers rallied.

"We just have to guard the 3-point line," Garrett said. "Banks County will live and die by the 3 and their 1-2-2 defense. We have to get stops and get out and run before they can set up their zone defense."



L-R: Jude Ellis, Houston Henry (MVP) and Hayden Hughes were selected to the BOTS All-Tournament team. Photo/Todd Forrest



# Lady Panthers open Region 8-AA with two blowout wins

## Union County finishes second at Battle of the States Christmas tourney

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The Lady Panthers have won five of six to improve to 9-7 on the year and 2-0 in Region 8-AA entering Tuesday's matchup at State runner-up Banks County (12-4, 2-0).

Union County's lone blemish since their Dec. 19 trip to White County came in the Battle of the States finals vs. No. 4 Rabun County, a 62-52 loss on Saturday, Dec. 30.

The Lady Panthers punched their ticket to the tournament finals via two blowout wins, 58-35 over Coosa in the semifinals and 55-38 vs. Franklin, North Carolina in the opener.

Union County jumped into region play on Jan. 2 with a 74-41 rout of a 10-1 Providence Christian squad, followed by another one-sided victory, 60-37 over Athens Academy.

**Lady Panthers 60, Athens Academy 37** - Union County overcame a slow start to pull away from the Spartans in the second half, outscoring the visitors 53-32 over the final three quarters.

"We couldn't get anything going early on and I was a little worried," Union County head coach Thomas Nelson said. "We would break their press then it was like a scramble, we couldn't get where we wanted to be."

Junior Ariel McCarter scored 11 of her game-high 21 points during the Lady Panthers' 24-12 third frame, breaking things open following a 23-14 halftime score.

Leading 7-5 on the heels of an offensively-challenged first frame, Katelyn Brown's steal resulted in two McCarter free throws to begin the second. Paula Robertson's step-back 3



Union County finished second at the 29th Annual Battle of the States Christmas Tournament at Towns County. The Lady Panthers knocked off Franklin, NC and Coosa before falling to No. 4 Rabun County. Photo/Todd Forrest

made it 12-5, and then McCarter's 18-footer built a 9-point margin at the 5:36 mark.

Hope Taylor bumped the lead to 18-7 with a low-post bucket, and Hensley Adams' putback made it 20-7 with 3:16 before the break.

Morgan Warren split two free throws 56 seconds later to hand Union its largest first-half margin at 14 points.

Athens Academy outscored the Lady Panthers 7-2 over the final 2 minutes to climb within single digits entering the break. The Spartans opened the third with a bucket, cutting the lead to 23-16 until McCarter's and-1 bumped

the difference back to double digits.

Sloane Dyer's steal led to a McCarter trey, then two Dyer free throws, a Robertson jumper and McCarter's dribble-drive increased the margin to 35-19 inside the 5-minute mark.

Kamryn Mull's 3 and a free throw each from McCarter and Taylor opened up a 40-21 lead. Later, another Mull trey spotted Union County a 47-26 advantage at quarter's end.

Mull finished with 8 points, 5 rebounds and 3 steals. Robertson scored 8 points to go with 4 rebounds and 4 assists. Brown had 7 points, 4 rebounds and 3 steals; Taylor added 7 points, 6 boards and 2 blocks.

Adams chipped in 4 points and 6 rebounds; Dyer had 2 points and 6 boards; Aubrie Akins finished with 2 points and 3 rebounds. Morgan Warren added a free throw, two rebounds, one assist and a steal.

**Lady Panthers 74, Providence Christian 41** - Union County used a 37-16 second half to pull away following a 37-25 halftime advantage.

Four Lady Panthers finished in double-figures, and 10 players cracked the scoring column in the win. Robertson led the way with 17 points

and 4 assists, while McCarter finished with 16 points and a game-high 7 steals.

Mull scored 12 points to go with 3 rebounds, 2 steals and 2 assists. Taylor poured in a career-high 11 points with 4 rebounds and a steal.

"When we're rolling, it's because we're forcing turnovers and scoring off the press," Nelson said. "Especially if our guards get rolling and start hitting some outside shots. Then you've got KB (Katelyn Brown), she does a lot of the little things that keeps us going."

Union County opened up a 16-9 lead after a quarter before two Providence Christian triples cut the margin to 18-15 less than a minute into the second.

The Lady Panthers pushed the lead to 23-15 via a Robertson layup and Mull's trey. Union built a double-digit lead courtesy of two buckets by Brown, Akins' short jumper, 5 points from Mull and McCarter's steal-and-score, extending the advantage to 36-20 at the 2-minute mark.

Robertson's trey from the wing and Mull's 2-on-1 layup triggered Union's second-half onslaught. Out front 42-27, two free throws from Dyer, a pair of driving layups by McCarter and Taylor's bucket opened up a 50-29 lead with

3:40 left in the third.

Brown finished with 5 points and 5 rebounds; Akins had 4 points and 5 boards; freshman Nomi Nelson added 3 points; Dyer had 2 points, 6 rebounds, 3 steals and 2 assists; freshman Ragan McCarter pitched in 2 points and 3 boards; Adams had 2 points and 3 rebounds.

Warren finished with 3 rebounds and two assists; Mady Adams had 2 rebounds and an assist.

**Lady Panthers 58, Coosa 35** - Union County's 22-11 first quarter and 18-5 fourth quarter put Coosa away for good during the BOTS semis.

The Lady Panthers held a 22-11 lead after one until getting outscored 12-2 in the second. Union opened up some breathing room in the third at 40-30 before blowing things open during the final frame.

"I was really proud of those kids that came off the bench and gave us a lift," Nelson said. "They really showed how hard they've worked. They came in, did well and took us home."

Unfortunately, senior Lara Turner suffered an ankle injury and did not return. According to Nelson, the four-year starter could return as early as this week.

Mull knocked down four 3s to score a team-high 12

points. Taylor finished with 9 points; Robertson had 8 points; Akins scored all of her 7 points in the fourth.

Brown added 7 points; McCarter and Turner had 7 each; Dyer finished with 3; Hensley Adams had 2 points.

**Lady Panthers 52, No. 4 Rabun County 62** - Rabun County took home the 2023 Battle of the States title, jumping ahead 19-9 after one and 37-21 at the break.

"Rabun has two very good players and if you can't control them, you're going to have a very long night," Nelson said.

The Lady Cats stretched their margin to 58-35 after three before putting it in cruise control for much of the fourth.

McCarter led Union County with 23 points -- 10 in the fourth -- to go with 15 rebounds, 3 assists and 2 steals. Brown finished with 8 points, 8 rebounds and 2 steals.

Hensley Adams had 6 points and 4 rebounds; Dyer added 5 points and 5 boards; Taylor ended with 4 points and 2 boards. Robertson was limited to 2 points and an assist after picking up three early fouls. Akins had 2 points and 5 rebounds; Mull ended with a free throw and 4 rebounds.

**Lady Panthers 55, Franklin, NC 38** - For stats and game details, see the Jan. 3 edition of the *North Georgia News*.

"Overall, I was happy for the kids, they played really hard [at the BOTS]," Nelson said. "We played really fast the first night and I think we got tired the second night."

**Up next:** The Lady Panthers visit the state runner-up during Tuesday's trip to Banks County. The contest tips off at 6 p.m. in a battle between the final two unbeaten teams in region play.

"We really have to win the turnover battle, but more importantly, we're going to have to box out," Nelson said regarding Banks County. "We have to hold our own with turnovers and not let them get out to a big lead on us."

Union County travels to East Jackson on Friday. The 5-7 Eagles suffered a 61-44 loss at Providence last week.

The Lady Panthers host Fannin County on Saturday in a rematch of last month's 68-50 loss in Blue Ridge.

"I'm really proud of the girls and the support we are getting from the community," Nelson said. "We're extremely thankful and we hope it keeps growing."



Kamryn Mull (L) and Ariel McCarter (R) earned All-Tournament Team honors at last month's Battle of the States. Photo/Todd Forrest

## UCHS Basketball 2023-24 Homecoming Court



Union County will announce its 2023-24 basketball homecoming king and queen ahead of Saturday's game vs. Fannin County. Jayden Karnes, Morgan Warren, Jude Ellis and Jensen Goble aren't pictured. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union County High School will crown its 2023-24 basketball Homecoming King and Queen on Saturday, Jan. 13 ahead of its varsity games vs. Fannin County.

The festivities get underway at 2:15 p.m. before the Lady Panthers tip-off at 3 p.m.

This year's court includes seniors Reese Chambers, Kamryn Mull, Jewell Massey, Morgan Warren, Lane Lance, Jensen Goble, Caiden Tanner and Connor Swanson.

Junior representatives are Aubrie Akins, Hensley Adams, Jayden Karnes, Houston Henry, Jack Wilson and Jude Ellis.

Sophomores are Khloe Ashcraft, Mady Adams and Trent Webster. Freshman reps are Izzy Anthros, Ella Akins, Ethan Hogsd and Jacob Brown.

Saturday's ceremony marks the third year since UCHS recommenced its basketball homecoming court after 20-plus years. A year ago, Jaycee Seabolt and Eli Underwood took home the honors. Emily Byers and Caleb John were named queen and king, respectively, in 2021-22.



Seniors Jaycee Seabolt and Eli Underwood were crowned UCHS basketball homecoming king and queen during the 2022-23 ceremony. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Hope Taylor scored 11 points during Union County's 74-41 win over Providence Christian. Photo/Todd Forrest

### UCHS SWIM TEAM TOP 10 FINISHES

Shiver Me Timbers Meet | Jan. 6 | Tallulah Falls

<b>200 Medley Relay</b> Boys A- 2nd: Andrew Nushtayev, Cole Orlando, Wyatt Chandler, Nicholas Nushtayev Girls A- 5th: Lilly Collins, Lily Helton, Reese Jones, Sophia Licavoli Girls B- 9th: Samantha Odom, Deliah Hernandez, Zoie Parmely, Isabel Hoover	<b>200 Free Relay</b> Boys A- 2nd: Andrew Nushtayev, Wyatt Chandler, Cole Orlando, Nicholas Nushtayev Girls A- 4th: Lily Helton, Isabel Hoover, Sophia Licavoli, Reese Jones Girls B- 8th: Deliah Hernandez, Samantha Odom, Isabel Hoover, Zoie Parmely
<b>50 Free</b> Nicholas Nushtayev: 1st Andrew Nushtayev: 2nd Cole Orlando: 3rd Lily Helton: 4th Isabel Hoover: 9th	<b>100 Back</b> Andrew Nushtayev: 2nd Lilly Collins: 5th Sophia Licavoli: 8th
<b>100 Free</b> Nicholas Nushtayev: 2nd Cole Orlando: 5th Wyatt Chandler: 9th Reese Jones: 4th	<b>100 Breast</b> Wyatt Chandler: 7th Lily Helton: 4th Reese Jones: 6th Deliah Hernandez: 10th

Overall Combined: 4th  
Boys 3rd  
Girls 4th