

Sports

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Panthers clinch fourth with wins over Rabun County, at Putnam County

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Union County took two of three last week to lock-up the No. 4 seed in next week's Region 8-AA tournament, beginning Monday at Elbert County.

Entering the week, the Panthers remained hopeful they could win-out and shake things up by forcing at least a three-way tie for second place but those aspirations went up in smoke with Tuesday's loss at Social Circle. The remaining possibility -- albeit a very slim one -- of forcing a tie for third went out the window on Friday when Banks County upset 5th ranked Elbert.

Despite the loss at Social Circle, the Panthers went into Friday with a shot to eliminate Rabun County from a top-four spot while moving one step closer to securing the 4-seed for themselves. Expecting the Wildcats' best shot and knowing anything is possible in a rivalry game, Union County protected its home court and took care of business against a streaky Rabun County squad.

With Putnam's victory over Monticello on Friday, the Panthers needed a road win at Putnam County on Saturday to clinch the fourth spot. Savvy to the fact they could pull within a game of fourth place by defeating the Panthers, the War Eagles threw everything they had at Union but came up short in a double overtime thriller thanks to Sawyer Drake's second game-winner on the road in the last eight days.

Following a red-hot start, Union County floundered a 12-point advantage to a Putnam County squad still capable of finishing anywhere between fifth and seventh place in the upcoming region tournament. (See 'Big Picture' for more on potential playoff scenarios.)

Panthers 52, Putnam County 51 (2 OT) -- Union County made the long haul to Putnam County to face a War Eagle squad still battling for the 5th seed and the right to face Union in the first round. With a win over the Panthers, Putnam County could put a stranglehold on fifth place, unfortunately, Union County wasn't about to roll over for the War Eagles.

Trailing 51-50 in the second overtime, Drake got the ball down low and immediately attacked the rim, splitting a double team and scoring at the rim with under 20 seconds left.

"We were trying to run the pick-and-roll to get an easy layup for the win and I got smacked in the face," Drake said. "(Putnam) threw some different looks at us defensively, things we haven't seen this year but we're just going to have to go over it in practice and see what we can do better."

Coming out of a timeout, Putnam wasted little time firing up a quick trey that bounced off the rim and resulted in a scrum for the loose ball that eventually bounced out off a Union defender and sent Drake to the bench with blood pouring from his nose.

Early in the first overtime, junior Sawyer Brey rolled his ankle defending a War Eagle fast break and didn't return. With Britt Waller fouled out and Drake sidelined, Union County was down three of its best post defenders as Putnam County inbounded under the basket with 3.8 seconds left. After using two timeouts, the War Eagles couldn't have asked for a better look with the game on the line. But luckily for the Panthers, they were a bit too strong on a chip-shot from the block and Cayden Rich secured the weakside rebound and the victory.

Out of the gates, however, the game showed all the symptoms of an easy Union County victory. Riding 10 early points from Pierson Allison, the Panthers jumped out front 22-10 at the 3:30 mark of the second quarter and appeared on the verge of blowing out the home team. Instead, Putnam County coach Kerry English successfully switched to a box-and-one defense to neutralize Allison.

The junior point guard was limited to five free throws and no field goals during the second half and overtime as the War Eagles began chipping away at the Panther lead.

"They went to a box-and-one in the second quarter and we drew something up at halftime but going out there and executing it efficiently is hard to do," Coach Jones said. "We toughed it out and anytime you can get a win a road you take it. Especially



Sawyer Drake's game winner at Putnam County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Jared Nelson's (44) defense sparked Union at Putnam. Photo/Todd Forrest

when you blow a 12 point lead and need double overtime."

Putnam County was able to surpass Union at 32-31 and 34-33, just shy of the midway point of the fourth quarter. Junior Sawyer Brey put the Panthers back on top at 35-34 by going coast-to-coast for a layup with 3:13 remaining. Almost a minute later, sophomore Colton Day knocked down a pull-up jumper for a 37-34 advantage.

With 1:29 to play, Rich appeared to put the game away by hitting both free throws during a 1-and-1 situation that opened up a 39-34 Union lead.

The War Eagles responded with a trey to pull within two, and following a Union miss on the other end, Putnam missed the front-end of a 1-and-1 but the Panthers were unable to secure the rebound and the War Eagles regained possession. Moments later, Putnam returned to the line where they sank 2-of-2, tying the score at 39-39 with 38 seconds left.

With time winding down, junior Sawyer Drake was unable to connect on a short jumper in the paint and Rich's putback try also bounced off the rim, sending the contest into overtime.

In the extra session, Putnam struck first with a breakaway layup and a 1-for-2 trip to the line. Out front 42-39 with 2:06 to play, the War Eagles wasted an excellent opportunity to put Union County's backs against the wall with two missed free throws.

On the other end, Allison sank 1-of-2 at the line for his team's first points of overtime with 1:23 remaining. Instead of playing it safe, Putnam County went on the attack and beat the Panther press for a quick layup and a 44-40 lead as the clock approached 1-minute.

With 48 seconds left, senior Kanon Hemphill, who was shaken up on the defensive end, sank a 15-footer from the corner before heading to the bench with his team down by two.

After Putnam split a pair of free throws, Allison was perfect at the line with 23 seconds left to pull Union within a point at 45-44. Five seconds later, Waller was tagged with his fifth foul, sending the War Eagles to the four line, where they hit 1-of-2 with 18 seconds remaining.

Despite Putnam fronting Allison and denying him the ball throughout the second half, the Panthers' leading scorer was able to get the ball in his hands on the wing with the game on the line. Allison managed a decent look at the basket after shaking the defender with a step-back three. As the clock ticked under 10 seconds, the potential game-winner went long and bounced off the other side of the rim and into the hands of Rich, who sent the game into a second overtime with a layup in the final seconds. Putnam nearly banked in a midcourt heave but the shot was immediately waived off and wouldn't

have counted had it gone.

The War Eagles, once again, got on the board first in OT-2 but Day knotted the score with two clutch free throws at the 2:48 mark. Putnam answered on the ensuing possession and held a 50-48 lead inside of two minutes when Drake tied it back up at 50-50 when he drew contact while scoring in the paint.

Unable to convert the 3-point play and give Union the lead at the line, the Panthers were hit with a foul on Drake's missed free throw, sending Putnam to the line. With 1:56 left, the War Eagles hit 1-of-2 for a lead that would hold until the final 16 seconds.

Drake finished with 9 points - four coming in the second overtime. Rich and Brey scored 8 points apiece. Hemphill and Waller chipped in four each; Day added two.

Panthers 62, Rabun County 55 - Union County held off a late Wildcat surge to wrap up its fourth straight victory in the series, and more importantly, improved its positioning for the approaching postseason.

Trailing 27-26 at halftime, Allison and Drake carried the Panthers in the second half, scoring 31 of Union's 36 second-half points and all 13 fourth-quarter points.

The third quarter got underway with a bucket from Waller to put Union on top. Later in the period, Day connected from downtown to stretch the margin to 45-37 at the 1:38 mark.

Those would be the only second-half points scored by a Panther not named Allison or Drake.

Following Waller's deuce to start the third, Drake extended the lead to 30-27 but Rabun County answered with five-straight to regain the advantage at 32-30.

The lead would last exactly 11 seconds as Allison drilled a trey, swinging the score back into Union's favor. On the heels of another Wildcat lead, this one lasting nine seconds, Drake scored the next six Panther points before Allison's third triple of the night opened up a 42-37 advantage.

Day's three gave Union an eight-point edge but Rabun an-



Cayden Rich drives to the basket at Putnam Co. Photo/Todd Forrest



Pierson Allison had 21 vs Rabun County on Friday. Photo/Todd Forrest

swered right back with a 3-ball of its own. Over the final 39 seconds of the third, Allison sank four free throws sandwiched around a 1-of-2 foray from the Wildcats, sending the Panthers into the final frame with a 49-41 lead.

Rabun connected from long distance early in the fourth but Allison canceled it out with an and-one on the other end. Despite a stretch of 4-plus minutes without a field goal from the Wildcats, Union County was unable to deliver the final nail in the Rabun County coffin as the turnover bug plagued the Panthers down the stretch. As the Panthers stumbled, the capricious, yet dangerous Wildcats sprung back to life, stroking the 3-ball with ease and pulling within a deuce at 54-52 with 2:26 to go.

Coach Jones took a timeout to settle his squad and out of the huddle, Allison drew a foul on a corner-trey. He would sink two of his three free throws with 1:52 remaining, and later, following a Rabun miss, he split a pair at 1:28 but Drake was able to secure the offensive board and hit 1-of-2 himself with 1:24 to play.

"We went (zone) and I think that threw (Rabun County) off a little bit," Coach Jones said. "We would get a stop or a turnover then come down and turn it over ourselves, so yeah, it was a little frustrating that we couldn't stretch that lead out but we played hard and were able to make a few free throws down the stretch."

As quickly as they heated up, the Wildcats cooled off and the Panthers put the game away with a Drake layup and two foul shots by Allison over the final 65 seconds.

The duo of Allison and Drake combined for 44 points with Drake racking up a game-high 23 and Allison pouring in 21 points on 10-of-12 shooting from the line.

Day scored 6 points on a pair of 3-pointers while Brey and Hemphill added 4 points apiece. Rich and Waller chipped in 2 points each.

Panthers 35, Social Circle 39 - Union County's frantic comeback bid ran out of time at second place Social Circle on Tuesday.

The Panthers trailed by

double-digits in the fourth quarter but were able to trim the deficit to two points in the final seconds before the Redskins knocked down a pair of free throws to stamp out any hopes of a rally.

Social Circle's slow, methodical pace combined with a full-court pressure defense kept Union County out of rhythm most of the night.

A cold start by both squads had the Panthers out front 6-4 after one but the Redskins surged ahead 14-12 at the break and 28-21 through three.

Drake led Union with 13 while Allison added 10 and Waller had eight. Brey and Rich each finished with 2 points.

Big Picture: With their postseason fate known, the Panthers can play the final two games free of any pressure. They can also use this week to rest anyone with bumps, bruises or nagging injuries. All that remains to be seen at this point is who Union County will face on Monday.

As of this writing, Putnam County sits in fifth place with a 4-8 region record while Monticello and Rabun County are tied for sixth at 3-9.

The Wildcats missed an excellent opportunity to knock Monticello into seventh but suffered a 54-51 home loss to the Hurricanes on Saturday.

Putnam is in the driver's seat but hosts Elbert County on Tuesday and Rabun County on Friday. Speaking of the Wildcats, they also have a tough task ahead on Tuesday when they host Social Circle.

Monticello visits Oglethorpe County on Tuesday for Senior Night before hosting Elbert County on Friday. Should Monticello take care of business at last-place Oglethorpe and Elbert and Social Circle avoid the upsets in their respective contests, Friday's Rabun County at Putnam County game would decide who ties Monticello for fifth.

The tiebreaker is head-to-head meetings but all three split with each other. The second tiebreaker is head-to-head vs the No. 1 seed and then working down. As of now, that would give Putnam County the edge due to its early season victory over Social Circle, who is currently tied for second. That could all change, however, if Monticello

upsets Elbert County or Rabun County Social Circle.

Last, and hopefully unnecessary, is a coin toss to break any remaining ties.

From the looks of it, Union County won't know its opponent until the dust settles on Friday evening. And with winter weather expected on Tuesday, there is the potential for Saturday being used as a make-up date.

As for Coach Jones, he doesn't have a preference as to who his team faces in the opening round. Union County swept the season series from all three teams competing for the 5-seed. But with the exception of the game at Rabun County (where Union still trailed at halftime), none of them could be considered blowouts.

"Everyone says it's tough to beat a team three times but if we execute the way we're capable, I think we'll be fine," Jones said. "But if you let Rabun get hot from three, they're tough to beat. They can beat anybody. If we play Putnam, we know they're going to go box-and-one on Pierson because it was effective the last time. Even the Monticello game came down to a game-winning shot and was another one-point victory for us. But we know what we have to do, the thing is just going out there and doing it."

Up next: The Panthers are scheduled to visit Banks County on Tuesday but the status remains uncertain as of Monday's deadline. While Union County has sewn up its position, Banks County still has plenty to play for. The Leopards are tied for second place with Social Circle at 9-2 in the region and are coming off a victory over Elbert, which pulls them to within a game of first place. But with an easy schedule remaining for the Blue Devils -- their last two opponents are a combined 7-17 in region play -- it would take a monumental upset to force a two or even a three-way tie for first, and not to mention, Banks County and Social Circle would also have to win out. Although, from Union's perspective, it's likely that the Panthers would rather see Banks County or Social Circle as the No. 1 seed in the second round instead of Elbert County, should Union advance past Monday.

Tuesday's contest is scheduled for a 6 p.m. girls tip-off with the guys to follow. On Friday, Union County will host Oglethorpe County for Senior Night beginning at 6 p.m. with the girls.

In the event Tuesday's game is postponed, it would be played either Wednesday, Thursday or Saturday. But with Union County facing its most important contest of the season on Monday, Coach Jones is hoping it can be made up Wednesday or Thursday so his team will have time to prepare for Monday's win-or-go-home playoff game. However, he feels if conditions are unsafe on Tuesday, it's unlikely that it'll clear up enough to get the green light on Wednesday.

As of this writing, Union County's first-round opponent and starting time are unclear. What we do know is, the Panthers will open the postseason Monday at Elbert County.

A loss for Union on Monday and the season is over. A win on Monday guarantees the Panthers at least three more games, starting with Thursday's Region 8-AA Semifinal and Friday's Region title game or consolation game -- depending on Thursday's result.

Should Union County advance to the state tournament, placing third or better should be its highest priority. This season, Region 8-AA is matched up with 5-AA, which features only one squad with a winning record -- 9th ranked Spencer, who has run roughshod over the region at 10-0 and 19-3 overall. Only once this season has a region opponent finished within single digits of Spencer and that was a nine-point victory at Lamar County on Jan. 12.

Daddy
Daughter
Dance

When: Saturday, February 9, 2019 6 PM - 9 PM

Cost: \$50 per couple

\$20 for each additional daughter

Tickets are limited and must be purchased in advance.

Tickets are available only at the Union County Recreation

Office located at 310 Welborn Street.

Dinner and limo rides are included.

Pictures are an additional fee.

Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions.

2019 Baseball and Softball
registration opens at the
Union County Recreation Department
January 7th - February 15th
for ages 3-14. Fee: \$55

3-4 Coed Start Smart-parent participation is required.

5-6 Coed T-ball

11-12 Softball

7-8 Girls Machine Pitch

11-12 Baseball

7-8 Boys Machine Pitch

13-14 Softball

9-10 Softball

13-14 Baseball

9-10 Baseball