

Sports

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Basketball: Panthers end regular season with three straight wins

Three-seed Union County and second-seeded Elbert meet again in postseason first round

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The Union County men (11-12, 4-4) closed out the 2021-22 regular season with a perfect week and will enter this week's Region 8-AA tournament as the No. 3 seed.

The Panthers will face 8-AA's No. 2 seed Elbert County during Thursday's opening round, one week removed from their 78-51 rout of the Blue Devils on Thursday, Feb. 10 in Blairsville.

Combined with a 65-37 blowout of Riverside Military Academy on Tuesday, Feb. 8, Union County finished off its Region 8-AA slate winning three of four (four-of-five overall) to capture sole possession of third place.

Panthers 78, Elbert County 51 - Despite building a 39-25 second-quarter advantage, Union County found itself clinging to a 43-38 lead early in the third after the Blue Devils closed the first half on a 7-0 run, then outscored the home team 6-4 to exit the break.

With Elbert County on the verge of setting up a potentially-intense final 13 minutes of play, the contest turned on a dime as Union County scored 15 straight points and mounted a 58-38 lead just inside of the third frame's one-minute mark.

"Down there [during Union's 54-51 loss at Elbert County on Feb. 4], I felt we were getting everything that we wanted offensively," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said, explaining his confidence entering last Thursday's 8-AA rematch. "I felt like we were executing everything and getting the looks we wanted, we just went cold at the end of the game."

"We also didn't rebound the way we have all year. We've won the rebound battle in almost every game, but [Elbert out-rebounded] us pretty good down there. I knew it would still be a dogfight up there because that's just their style of play - they crash the glass. I just had a good feeling that we'd do a better job of controlling [the boards] the second time."

The Panthers' momentum began with 4:46 left in the period when a Caleb John dribble-drive resulted in two. Senior Landon Kight hit a pair of free throws 18 seconds later, and freshman Jude Ellis drove the lane to extend the lead to double digits at 49-38. Moments later, Ellis attacked the basket again, this time dishing to Kight for an open layup.

With 2:56 remaining in the quarter, freshman Houston Henry sank two at the charity stripe, and senior Daniel Snow hit 2 of 2 with 1:08 on the clock. Following a Blue Devils' turnover, senior Austin Taylor drew a foul, putting the finishing touches on the 15-0 onslaught with two free throws.

"Our defense and rebounding are what sparked us," Garrett said. "I think switching to a 2-3 (zone) tonight was a good idea - we started getting deflections and it had [Elbert County] out of rhythm."

Elbert halted the run with a layup, but Henry responded by driving the lane, resulting in a 3-point play when the Panthers point guard converted an off-balance layup while falling



Freshman guard Houston Henry (14) is on the business end of a hard second-half foul that led to a 3-point play vs. Elbert. Photo/Todd Forrest

to the floor after taking a hard bump.

Junior Eli Underwood opened the fourth by scoring inside to extend the margin to 63-41, and following an Elbert free throw, Kight made it a 66-42 contest with an and-one at the 6:18 mark.

With 4:38 left and the Panthers running the fast break, an Ellis layup attempt drew an aggressive hack across the forearm but the freshman regathered possession in mid-air and managed to flip in a one-handed shot, resulting in another 3-point play and a 69-44 runaway.

Consecutive 3's from Snow, beginning at the 3:06 mark, along with another trey by senior Eli Peugh, built Union's largest margin of the contest at 78-46 with 1:40 remaining.

Ellis led all scorers with 18 points to go with two steals. John scored 13 of his 15 points during the first half and finished with seven rebounds and two steals.

During the first half, John went on the attack early and often, scoring eight in the first quarter, all coming via dribble penetration.

"I wanted to come out, be aggressive and get things going with my energy; I was able to get some paint touches and able to score," John said after the game.

"That was huge," Garrett added, regarding the play of his senior leader. "We always try to get [John] into attack-mode, but he was on another level tonight. He had a different look in his eye and an extra bounce in his step."

With Union trailing 4-2, John cracked the scoring column with a dribble drive, and later, broke a 7-7 tie with another aggressive move to the basket. Two more drives from John provided margins of 16-12 and 18-14 before an Ellis trey opened up a 21-14 cushion.

A 7-1 Blue Devils' spurt trimmed the visitors' deficit to 22-21 early in the second frame, but John continued to attack, scoring at the rim with 7:20 on the clock. Still nursing a 26-24 lead, Union found some breathing room courtesy of an 11-0 run, sparked by an Underwood putback with 4:51

left in the half.

Ellis scored five straight -- coming by way of two free throws and a triple -- and Taylor sank a pair at the stripe before John finished the run with a layup off an inbounds play.

Following an Elbert County free throw, Kight went to work in the post, stretching the margin to 39-25 with 1:44 before the break. However, the Blue Devils rattled off seven unanswered in under 50 seconds to slash the Union advantage to 39-32 heading to the locker room.

"I probably need to do a better job of realizing those runs," Garrett said. "But I think, as a young coach, I try to let our guys play through it, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

"I thought tonight, by taking that timeout with 31 seconds left [in the half], we weren't able to get a bucket out of it, but we slowed [Elbert's] tempo and stopped their run. Then we were able to go into halftime and talk about it, and they never had another run after that."

Kight finished with 12 points, a game-high nine boards and three steals. Henry had 9 points, a game-high four assists and three steals. Snow added 8 points on 2-of-3 shooting from long distance and 2 of 2 at the line. Senior Lake Hughes scored 5 points with two boards; Taylor had 4 points and five rebounds, while Underwood chipped in 4 points and two rebounds.

Peugh scored 3 points with one rebound. Senior Hayden Payne finished with one board and one assist.

The Panthers shot 43% (26 of 61) from the floor, 30% (7 of 23) from behind the arc and 18 for 25 (72%) at the charity stripe. Elbert County made 19-of-54 overall (35%) while hitting 6-of-19 (32%) treys and 7 of 15 (47%) at the foul line.

Union held a narrow 37-36 edge on the boards and outscored the Blue Devils 38-14 in the paint. The Panthers' six turnovers were a season-low, while Elbert County coughed it up 17 times.

"The plan going in defensively was to get a lot of tips and have active hands and that led to some fast-break points,"



Senior Caleb John's 28 combined points vs. RMA and Elbert were a new career-high for points in back-to-back games. Photo/Todd Forrest

John said. "Energy on defense leads to energy on offense and that's how we were able to get rolling."

The Panthers and Blue Devils will square off in the rubber match on Thursday at 5:30 p.m., where the winner punches a ticket to Friday's Region 8-AA title game.

"We expect a battle [when Union faces Elbert again] on Thursday, but I think tonight really went a long way in showing that we'll be ready to play too," John said.

Rabun County hosts the region tournament after the Lady Cats secured 8-AA's No. 1 seed over Elbert during last week's tiebreaking coin toss.

"It's gonna be a chess match on Thursday," said Garrett concerning his squad's first-round matchup. "It'll be a chess match with [Elbert County head coach Don Hurlburt], he's a great coach and we're going to get to see these young men go at it one more time. It's going to be fun."

The Region 8-AA finals and consolation games will be Friday, Feb. 8.

Panthers 65, Riverside Military Academy 37 - Trailing 16-13 during the second quarter to winless RMA, Union County finally turned it on in front of the home crowd, closing the half with a 17-1 run before pulling away for good with a 30-8 third period.

Tied at 6-6 following a sluggish first frame, Taylor opened the second with a trey for a 9-6 advantage. But RMA raced ahead with four unanswered before a Taylor floater put Union back on top 11-10.

A bucket by Snow made it 13-10 until a 6-0 RMA spurt put Union in a 16-13 deficit to the upset-minded Eagles near the midway point of the frame.

Kight triggered the Panthers' turnaround with a putback out of a timeout, then a steal-and-score from John gave Union County the lead at 17-16. Kight made it a 19-16 game and RMA split two free throws with 2:13 left in the first half.

The Eagles wouldn't score again until the 5:24 mark of the third as 4 points from Henry and a John putback extended the Panthers' advantage to 25-17. A Kight offensive

board made it 27-17, and an Ellis trey in the final seconds opened up a 30-17 halftime margin.

Hughes jump-started the third with a 3-ball from the wing, followed by a floater from Ellis and a 3-point play by John that mounted a 38-17 Union County lead at the 5:47 mark of the quarter.

On the heels of an RMA free throw, the Panthers tore off 15-in-a-row, ignited by four points from Henry. John scored consecutive buckets and Hughes connected from the corner before a John layup finished a fast break. A pull-up jumper by Ellis supplied Union a 53-18 advantage before RMA split another trip to the charity stripe with 2:51 left in the third.

Underwood followed

with a 1-for-2 visit to the line, then Kight drilled a transition 3 from the top of the circle for a 57-19 lead. With the home team still in control at 57-24, a Taylor 3-pointer with 19 seconds left in the period halted a 5-0 Eagles' spurt.

Ahead 60-25 after three Union County youngsters, sophomore Caiden Tanner and freshman Hayden Hughes, got in on the scoring during a mercy rule-shortened fourth period with Tanner scoring via a dribble-drive and Hughes connecting from deep.

John, the only Panther in double figures, finished with 13 points, two assists and two steals. Meanwhile, Kight ended his day with a career-high four blocked shots along with 9 points and eight boards.

Ellis added 9 points and four rebounds. Henry had 8 points, two assists, two steals and a blocked shot; Taylor scored 8 points to go with one assist.

Lake Hughes finished with 6 points, four rebounds, two assists and two steals. Hayden Hughes added 3 points, two rebounds and a steal.





Payne, Peugh, Snow and Tanner chipped in 2 points apiece; Underwood had 1 point, five boards and a steal.

Freshman Maddox Young finished with one board and one steal; sophomore Braylen Rader blocked a shot and secured a rebound.

Union County shot 26 of 61 (43%) from the floor, 7 of 20 (35%) from long distance and 6 of 13 (46%) at the charity stripe. RMA hit 13-of-41 (32%) overall, 2 of 7 (29%) from deep and 9 of 16 (56%) at the line.

The Panthers doubled up the Eagles 46-23 on the glass and outscored the visitors 36-22 in the 3-second area. Union County turned it over 20 times while forcing 23 takeaways, resulting in a substantial 26-10 points-off-turnovers edge.

Union County Recreation Department
Age: 50 and over
Spring Session 2022 - Fitness Family Programs

Spring will be here before we know it, and we would love for you to join us for our Spring Fitness Family classes! Union County Recreation Department will be offering all our very popular class options for the Spring 2022 session, and we will be bringing back our popular Yoga class with our new instructor!

Here is a list of all our fitness classes that will be offered for the session:

- Mini-Spinning cardio class
(M/W) @ 8:30-9:30 AM - \$10. Spring special
- Regular Aerobics Fitness
(T/Th/F) @ 8:30-9:30 AM - \$30.
- Advanced Strength-Core class
(M/W/F) @ 9:45-10:45 AM - \$35.
- AM Beginner Pilates-Core class
(T/Th) @ 11-11:45 AM - \$35.
- AM Intermediate Step-Aerobics combo
(M/W/F) @ 11-11:50 AM - \$45.
- Dance Jams
(T/Th) @ 10-10:45 AM - \$40.
- Chair Fitness-Aerobics class
(T/W/Th) @ 1:15-2 PM - \$30.
- Zumba Fitness w/Lisa
(M/W) @ 8:30-9:30 - \$50.
- Yoga w/Quinn
(M/W) @ 12-1 - \$35.
- **PM Zumba Fitness w/Beth
@ 5-6 PM (T/Th) - \$50.
- **PM Step-Aerobics combo class
@ 5-6 PM (M/W) - \$40.

*Spring Session Registration opens on Feb. 2, and ends on Feb. 23, 2022, or "when classes fill to capacity". You can register at the New Union County Recreation Sports Center Office located at 519 Industrial Blvd next to the Health Department. Please contact Jennifer at 706-487-4453 with any questions you may have.

Wrestling: Guild places third, Phillips fourth at State championships

Union County wrestling concludes weekend with four top-six finishes

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Macon - Union County seniors Brady Guild and Sean Phillips turned in a third and fourth-place finish, respectively, during last weekend's Class AA State Wrestling Championships.

In the program's strongest-ever showing at the State level, Guild defeated Dade County senior Zac Smith in the 160-lb. consolation finals to secure the best individual performance by a Panthers' wrestler. Meanwhile, Phillips dropped his final match in the 170-lb. division by decision to Bremen's Ty Morris.

Guild's weekend began with a pinfall victory over a familiar foe, Banks County senior Roman Haynes. Ahead of the third-round pin, the two Area 8 seniors were locked in a tightly-contested bout that saw Guild clinging to a narrow 9-7 points edge. Entering the final round, however, Haynes maintained a 6-5 advantage before Guild turned the tide and eventually scored the pin.

Guild ran into the eventual Class AA State champ in the semifinals, Vidalia's Hunter Manning, and was on the wrong end of a 14-5 decision. During the first round of their semifinal match, Guild scored via a late escape and trailed just 2-1 entering round two. With Guild still down 4-3 late in round two, Manning took control with a reversal, and then a near-fall, building a 9-3 advantage after the second.

Guild returned to form in the consolation semis, scor-



L-R: Class AA third-place finisher Brady Guild, Union coach Justin Byers and fourth-place finisher Sean Phillips in Macon. Photo/submitted

ing a second-round pinfall over Oglethorpe County's Nate Brown while dominating the scorecard 8-2. Guild continued rolling into the consolation finals, notching a 13-2 major decision over Smith, despite leading just 2-0 after one round.

After escaping a near-fall early in round two, Guild rattled off five-straight points, including a near-fall of his own. Up 7-2 in round three, Guild scored six-straight, beginning with an early reversal to secure his third-place finish.

As for Phillips, his early clash with an Area 8 opponent didn't go as planned, dropping a 22-16 decision to Banks County's Cam Cooper. Trailing 15-8 after two rounds, Phillips nearly pulled off the comeback, but Cooper escaped a late near-fall to advance into the semifinals.

Phillips battled his way into the consol finals with three straight victories, beginning with

a 10-6 decision over Berrien County's Matthew Lopez. Phillips scored a second-round pin over Haralson County's Stephen Hardeman before picking up a forfeit win during the consolation semis.

Against Morris in the third-place bout, Phillips couldn't recover from an early 5-0 deficit, eventually dropping a 19-8 major decision.

Sophomore Zander Rotko finished sixth at 132 lbs. despite falling by pinfall to Callaway's Isaiah Shewmake in the first round. Rotko picked up two consolation victories, starting with a first-round pinfall over Oglethorpe County's Tanner Mask. He recorded another first-round pin against Bremen's Cooper Elliott before Fannin County junior Carson Collis pinned Rotko in the second round of the consolation semis.

In the girls' tournament, junior Shelby Agacinski came



The Union County men's Area placers have some fun during photo time after last month's Area 8 Championships. The event, hosted by Fannin, ignited the men's and women's recent postseason run. Photo/Todd Forrest

Class 6A Paulding County, pinned Agacinski in the second round. Prior to the pin, the two wrestlers were neck-and-neck with Brady holding a narrow 7-5 points lead.

In other girls' action, sophomore Brooke Kennedy won her first match in the 197-lb. division, needing only 29 seconds to pin Phoebe Melvin of Class 5A Greenbrier.

In round two, the eventual State runner-up, Mia Bernacki of Class 6A Effingham County, sent Kennedy into the consols via a first-round pinfall. Kennedy's day came to an end in the following round courtesy of Kaylee Nicholson from Marietta's Osborne High School (Class 6A).

As for the remaining guys, freshman Asa Smith-Foot (138) advanced to the second round with a forfeit victory over Dade

County's Brandon Willerson before dropping a 19-8 major decision to the eventual state champ Oglethorpe County senior Shane Watson.

Smith-Foot knocked off Coosa's Johan Alvarez via an 8-3 decision to begin the consolation tourney but fell to Northeast Macon's Demonte Flowers in the next round.

After suffering a pin at the hands of Bremen's James Bumgardner, freshman Payton Legatt (145) notched a consolation victory over East Laurens' Cole Page via a 7-4 decision. Model's Riley Davis, the eventual third-place finisher, survived a 5-3 decision over Legatt in the consolation quarterfinals.

At 120 lbs., Union County senior Landon Clark dropped a pair of decisions to Pepperell's Corey Moten and Jeff Davis. Gavin Coleman.

Basketball: Lady Panthers ride three-game skid into Region 8-AA tourney

Union County opens postseason Thursday vs. second-ranked Elbert County

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The Union County Lady Panthers will enter Thursday's Region 8-AA Tournament opener on a three-game slide following last week's home losses to Rabun Gap and No. 2 Elbert County.

Unfortunately, things won't get any easier in the first round as the Lady Panthers will again face Elbert County -- who could potentially reclaim the No. 1 spot in Class AA following its win over top-ranked Rabun County on Feb. 8. (The latest rankings were unavailable at press time).

Lady Panthers 51, No. 2 Elbert County 80 - Union County kept pace with the Blue Devils for the first 11-plus minutes before the visitors closed the second on a 7-1 spurt that dealt the Lady Panthers a 42-29 halftime deficit.

Union stayed within 15 for much of the third frame, but Elbert's red-hot shooting proved too much of an obstacle.

The Blue Devils hit 25-of-50 overall and 7 of 14 from 3-point territory through three quarters, allowing the visitors to build a 63-41 lead. Despite facing a 22-point hole, Union County continued chipping away, slicing the margin to 65-47 less than 80 seconds into the fourth.

However, Elbert County had one more run left in the tank, scoring 11 straight in under 95 seconds to put the Lady Panthers away for good at 76-47.

Senior Ava Hunter, who became just the second Lady Panther to top 1,500 career points during the second quarter, broke the scoreless stretch with a putback at the 4:42 mark. Later, following two more Elbert



Sophomore Lara Turner did her best to keep Union in contention vs. Elbert, scoring 7 of her team's 15 first-quarter points. Photo/Todd Forrest

County baskets, Hunter scored the contest's final points with 3:06 on the clock.

Hunter finished with game-highs of 23 points and 15 rebounds to go with two assists and a steal. She also moves within 85 points of Candace Williams' program-record 1,601 points with at least three games remaining.

During the first quarter on Thursday night, Union County fell into an early 9-4 deficit but broke even at 11-11 over the final 5 minutes of the first frame and trailed just 20-15 at quarter's end. A jumper by sophomore Lara Turner provided the Lady Panthers their only lead of the night at 2-0 as Turner (7) and Hunter (4) combined to score 11 of their team's 15 first-quarter points.

A dribble-drive by Hunter to start the second resulted in an and-one -- trimming the margin to 20-18. Moments

later, Hunter followed up a pair of Elbert baskets with a turnaround jumper to put her over the 1,500-threshold. An Elbert trey ended the difference to 27-20, but Hunter kept Union within striking distance, hitting another jumper in the paint at the 4:50 mark.

A Sofia McNabb trey and a 1-for-2 trip to the line by Hunter reduced the margin to 32-26 before Elbert knocked down another triple. Hunter continued to keep her team in the game, converting an offensive board with 2:17 on the clock.

The Blue Devils answered with four straight to build their first double-digit lead at 39-28, but Turner split a pair of free throws to narrow the gap to 39-29 with time running out in the half. A 10-point difference at the break would've been a small victory for Union, but Elbert connected from downtown with under 5 seconds to play for a 42-29 halftime score.

Turner began the third with a jumper, but the Blue Devils answered with a 6-0 spurt to extend the margin to 48-31. Hunter scored on a pull-up jumper from 15, then split two free throws to keep the margin at 14 until another six-unanswered from Elbert kept Union at bay.

Freshman Ariel McCarter hit from downtown and from the elbow then McNabb connected from the baseline, but it didn't make a dent in the Blue Devils' 63-41 lead heading to the fourth.

Turner finished with 10 points and two rebounds; McCarter had 10 points and two assists. McNabb chipped in 7 points and two boards while junior Corinne Hill had a team-high three steals along with three rebounds, two assists and one free throw.

Senior Rebekah Chambers added four rebounds. Seniors Aubrie Banton, Ansley Collins and sophomore Kamryn Mull added one board apiece.

Elbert County finished 32 of 68 (47%) from the floor, 8 of 19 (42%) from 3-point range and 8 of 17 (47%) at the foul line.



Freshman Ariel McCarter chases down a Rabun Gap ball-handler and blocks the layup from behind during the first half. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union County made 19-of-66 overall for a 29% clip, hit 3 of 22 (14%) from deep and 10 of 19 (53%) at the charity stripe.

Elbert out-rebounded Union County 51-34 and out-scored the home team 40-24 in the paint. The Lady Panthers won the turnover battle, forcing 18 Blue Devils' miscues compared to 15 Union County giveaways.

Third-seeded Union County and 2-seed Elbert County will meet for a third time on Thursday at Rabun County High School. The tip-off for Union's opening-round contest is 4 p.m.

Elbert County and Rabun finished tied atop the Region 8-AA standings but the Lady Cats took the top seed and home-court advantage by winning last week's tiebreaking coin toss.

The region finals and consolation games will be Friday, Feb. 18.

Lady Panthers 41, Rabun Gap 57 - Union County could not overcome a 19-8 first-quarter deficit during the first half of UCHS' Tuesday-night doubleheader on Feb. 8.

Trailing 25-12 with under a minute remaining in the second period, the Lady Panthers chipped away with five straight entering the break. A Chambers' baseline drive cut the margin to 25-14 with 50 seconds left, then a 3-point play by Hunter moved Union within single digits at the intermission.

Rabun Gap used consecutive baskets early in the third to quickly stretch its lead back to a dozen at 29-17 before a McCarter trey kept Union County hanging around. Later, two more Rabun Gap buckets placed the Lady Panthers in a 13-point hole but Hunter scored in the paint for a 33-22 tally.

Back-to-back triples by the visitors opened up a 39-22 score, but Hill connected from deep and Turner answered an Eagles' layup with a 3-ball from the wing.

Five-straight points from Rabun Gap quickly pushed the margin back to 46-28 before

A McNabb basket kept hope alive, down 46-33 early in the fourth, before an 8-0 Eagles' run all but put things away at 54-33. Buckets from Hunter and Turner had Union County within 18, then a McNabb steal-and-score and two Hunter free throws cut the difference to 55-41, just shy of the 2-minute mark.

The Lady Panthers wouldn't score again, and two Rabun Gap free throws a minute later provided the 57-41 final score.

Hunter led Union County with 13 points and seven rebounds. Turner finished with 10 points and five boards; McCarter scored 7 points with a team-high three assists.

McNabb had 4 points and six boards; Chambers added 4 points and two assists. Hill scored 3 points with one rebound to round out the Lady Panthers' scoring; Banton chipped in one steal.

UCHS spring sports update

Union County soccer took the pitch late last month following changes by the GHSA that advanced the usual start-date from mid-February to late January.

With at least another week remaining for Union basketball, the UCHS soccer programs are looking at another two-plus games without a full roster. Furthermore, the 8-AA schedule will get underway two weeks early on March 1.

The fifth-ranked Union County men are currently 2-1 on the year with a pair of shut-out victories over Lumpkin County and Murray County.

Union's lone blemish came by a 2-1 score at Class AAAA Pickens to open the season on Jan. 25.

The shorthanded Union County ladies dropped a 6-1 contest to Class AAA's sixth-ranked Lumpkin County on Feb. 8.

Union County visits Dawson County on Tuesday before traveling to Coahulla Creek on Thursday. The Coahulla Creek men are currently



Girls soccer coach Tim Hunter has an 8-AA title in his crosshairs