

# Sports

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## Panthers roll: Advance to first Elite Eight since '01

### No. 6 Union County to host KIPP Atlanta on Wednesday

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The Union County men (24-5) are moving on to the Elite Eight for the first time in 24 years following two blowout victories in the first two rounds of last week's Class AA State Tournament.

"These seniors deserve that banner [in the gym]," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "We played in four straight region championships and lost the last three to private schools, so it's nice to get them an Elite Eight banner."

"But I don't know, this year feels a little different, I feel like we've got something special going. It might all come to an end on Wednesday, but I feel like these four seniors are working on something special right now."

The No. 6 Panthers opened the tourney with an 87-61 rout vs. No. 27 Pierce County on Tuesday, Feb. 18, and then went on to throttle No. 11 Westside-Macon 75-33 during Saturday's Sweet 16 round.

The win over Westside marked the 24th victory of the year, equaling the 1997-98 squad with the second-most wins in program history behind the 1970-71 team's 29-1 State runner-up campaign.

The Panthers host KIPP Atlanta in the round of eight on Wednesday at 6:30 p.m.

**No. 6 Panthers 75, No. 11 Westside-Macon 33** - In the first-ever boys' Sweet 16 contest played in Blairsville, Union County shook off a 9-8 deficit after one quarter and pulled away from Westside, eventually putting the game away via a 29-1 third period.

"After the first quarter I simply told them 'we're not playing hard enough,'" Garrett said. "It was on us to change that and that was my only message after the first quarter."

The 42-point margin marked the program's most lopsided State playoff victory, surpassing Union's 71-43 win over Northwest Laurens in the opening round of the 1971 tournament.

Houston Henry led all



Junior Vince Marevka had 19 points and seven rebounds vs. Pierce County during the opening round. Photo/Todd Forrest

scorers with 18 points to go along with 10 assists, five rebounds and three steals. Maddox Young went for 16 points, five boards and three steals.

However, Henry and Young combined for only two first-quarter points as Union County's offense spun its wheels, trailing 9-8 after one, despite two Hayden Hughes 3-pointers resulting in an early 6-0 advantage. But on the Panthers' first possession of the second, Henry connected from 21 feet, spotting his team a lead they wouldn't relinquish.

Moments later, the senior point guard picked the pocket of a Westside ball handler, leading to a layup on the other end, and then Young hit from the corner, building a 16-9 lead less than two minutes into the quarter. Buckets by Young and Vince Marevka, followed by another Henry trey, awarded Union its largest lead of the half at 23-13 with 4:25 on the clock.

Westside answered with five straight but Marevka scored inside and Henry made two trips to the charity stripe, sending the Panthers to the locker room up 28-21.

While Westside's physi-

cal play kept things close for two quarters, the second half was a completely different story.

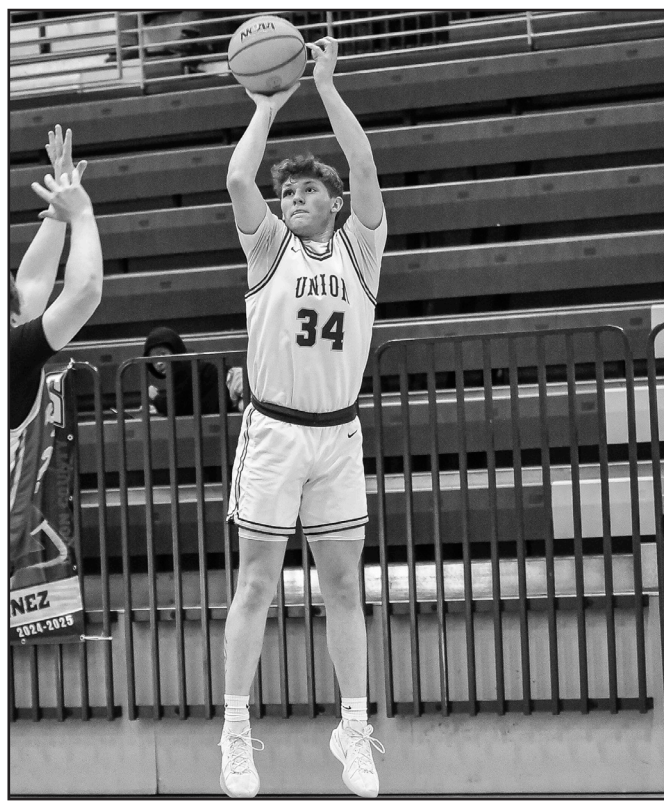
The Panthers outscored the visitors 47-12 after halftime, accentuated by a 28-1 third period, resulting in a 57-22 lead and a mercy-rule shortened fourth.

A Marevka putback, a Hughes triple and a feed to Kaden Combs in the paint put Union out front 35-21 at the 5:25 mark of the third. Just over a minute later, Westside split two free throws but it wasn't enough to slow the deluge as the Panthers opened the floodgates.

Young rattled off five straight and Combs drove to the hoop for a 42-22 advantage. With Westside on the ropes, Union County capitalized on consecutive Seminole turnovers, resulting in 6 points in 42 seconds.

"Our offense can score, but I've said from day one that our defense has to dictate the game," Garrett said.

But the Panthers weren't done. Following a Westside timeout, Henry converted a steal into two free throws, and Combs scored on back-to-back



Senior Hayden Hughes went off in the first half vs. Pierce County, hitting five 3s and scoring 22 points before the break. Photo/Todd Forrest

trips to close the third. Leading 66-30 near the four-minute mark, Garrett handed off to the reserves but Union didn't miss a beat as Hayden knocked down two 3s and Ryland Chambers hit another, delivering a 75-33 final score.

The Panthers finished 12 for 28 (43%) from long range and converted 21 Seminole turnovers into 27 points. Westside ended the night 2 of 17 (12%) from 3-point range and 13 for 45 (29%) overall.

Combs hit on all five of his shot attempts for 10 points, three rebounds, two assists and a steal. Marevka went 5 for 6 from the floor, scoring 10 points with seven boards and one assist.

Hughes ended the night 3 for 7 from behind the arc, scoring 9 points with three rebounds, three assists and three steals. Price scored 6 points and pulled down one board; Holden Payne added 3 points and three rebounds; Chambers chipped in 3 points and an assist.

Jackson Nichols finished with two rebounds and an assist; Ethan Hogsd and Jacob Rodriguez pulled down one

board each.

**No. 6 Panthers 87, No. 27 Pierce County 61** - Union County raced ahead 9-0 and never looked back in an opening-round home victory over Pierce County. During the win, the Panthers posted the program's second-highest State tournament point total, coming within two scores of Union's 92-73 victory over Georgia Military College in 1973.

During Tuesday's win, Henry poured in 23 points, 11 assists, five rebounds and three steals. Hughes finished with 22 points, eight rebounds and four steals.

Marevka added 19 points, seven boards and two steals.

"Hayden had a big first half and Huey came out and took over in the second half, then you had Vince doing his thing -- I think that was the story of the game," Garrett said. "I wish I had something more to say, but the way these guys have bought in and took our philosophy and made it theirs, they just make it work."

After the 9-0 start, Union County led 23-11 through one and 41-27 at the break. Henry and Marevka stretched the mar-

gin to 49-32, and then Henry's step-back 3, followed by a Combs free throw built a 53-34 advantage near the 4-minute mark. Young hit 3 of 4 at the line over the final 35 seconds, sending Union to the fourth up 63-43.

Combs and Marevka went to work inside to begin the final frame, but the final dagger came courtesy of a Henry triple, opening up a 72-48 lead with 4:32 remaining.

Combs ended his night with 6 points, eight rebounds, five assists and two steals. Payne had 5 points and a rebound; Hogsd finished with 2 points and a rebound; Rodriguez added 2 points; Price had one rebound and an assist.

Pierce's Joe Drew led all scorers with 30 points.

**Up next:** Union County advances to its seventh Elite Eight and will try to punch its ticket to the program's first final four in 53 years when they host No. 19 KIPP Atlanta (18-10) at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday.

KIPP earned its spot in the Elite Eight by knocking off No. 14 Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe 65-48, and No. 3 Morgan County 64-48.

"I think we can do everything we've always done and don't think we'll need to change anything [against KIPP]," Garrett said. "I think we just need to be more physical off of the basketball. The refs seem to eat their whistle a little more in the playoffs, especially off the ball, because we've seen it happen to us. So if we want to have a chance, we need to pick up our physicality off of the ball."

The Union - KIPP Atlanta winner will face the winner of No. 7 Laney at No. 2 Tattnall County in the semifinals on Friday, Feb. 28 at Georgia Southwest University.

"We need a big crowd here on Wednesday," Garrett said. "I don't want to hang it on the student section, but we didn't have many kids there in the first half [Saturday], but then the track guys got back [from their meet] at halftime and we went on a 29-1 run. We love our student section. That's what high school basketball is all about."

## Baseball: Panthers lose in extras at White County, blown out 13-1 by Madison County

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**Cleveland** - With both Fannin County games cancelled last week, Union County's only outing came in a Saturday doubleheader at White County against the Warriors and Madison County.

In the opener, the Panthers rallied from a 4-0 deficit to take a 6-4 lead, but surrendered a run in the sixth and seventh, sending the game to extra innings.

In the eighth, White County walked it off via a bases-loaded single.

Down 4-0 in the fifth, Maddox Patton's double opened the frame and Bo Brown's groundout put Union on the board. With two away in the inning, Cayden Miller's solo shot moved the Panthers within two.

Gunnar Akins singled to lead off Union's four-run sixth and Colton Gibson reached on a dropped third strike. With

two down, Patton singled home Akins, followed by a game-tying double from Eli Gwynn. Brown's two-run single plated Gwynn and Patton, spotting Union a 6-4 advantage.

White County pushed across one in the fifth, then added a bases-loaded hit by pitch in the seventh.

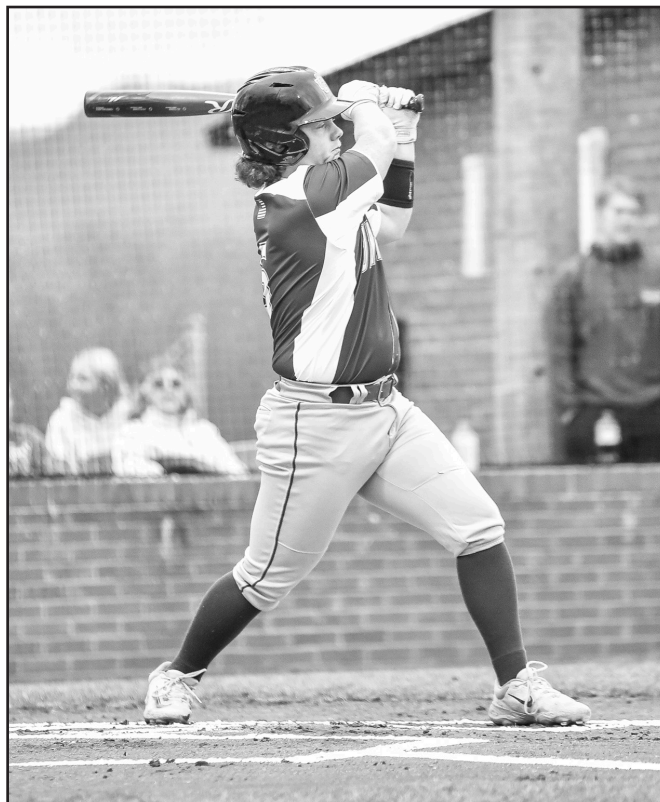
Akins went three innings, allowing four hits and three earned runs.

Tyler Richards gave up one earned run in three innings of relief. Gibson went 1+ innings, surrendering one unearned run in the eighth.

Against Madison, Union gave up 6 in the top of the first before getting its only run in the bottom half via Miller's two-out single.

Madison got one in the second, four in the third and two in the fourth, ending the contest in five innings.

The Panthers hosted Towns County on Monday and will host Lumpkin County on Wednesday and Rabun County on Friday.



Sophomore Cayden Miller belted the first homerun of his high school career on Saturday at White County. Photo/Todd Forrest

## Track and Field opens 2025 at Athens Academy



Jack Wilson (pictured) finished first in the discus throw, breaking a UCHS school record. Lola Hunter finished first in the 3200m and 1600m events; Ava Lloyd placed first in the 100m; Katie Payne won the 300m hurdles; the girls 4x200 relay also took home gold at Athens Academy on Saturday, Feb. 22.



# Panthers ready to 'E.A.T.' under new head coach Rob Stowe

By Todd Forrest  
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Former Wilcox County and Gilmer head coach Rob Stowe will take the helm of Union County football following his approval at last Thursday's Union County Board of Education meeting.

"[The Union County] job is one that I've looked at for about 15 years with great fondness," Stowe said. "A few years ago, I made a list of the top 10 schools I'd love to coach at, and Union County was on that list. The people, the football and the mountains are great. Plus, I believe it's a place that God is leading me to."

Stowe was asked what Panther fans can expect from their team under his leadership. His response: "E.A.T."

"Effort. Attitude. Toughness. We're going to preach from day one that you can control those three things," he said. "I can't control it. Your mama can't control it. You control it."

"If you give a good effort, have a good attitude and you're tough, you're going to be a good football player, and you're going to make us a good football team, and we're going to win our fair share of games."

Stowe, who brings more than two decades of coaching experience to Blairsville, becomes the 15th head football coach in the program's 67 years, replacing Michael Perry, who departed for Flowery Branch in January.

A Toccoa native, Stowe comes to Union County by way of Wilcox County, where he compiled a 50-24 record in six seasons, headlined by back-to-back region titles in 2021 and 2022, and a State semifinal appearance in '21.

During his high school days at Stephens County, Stowe was coached by the program's all-time wins leader, Rodney Walker, who Stowe credits



Union County football will be under the leadership of incoming head coach Rob Stowe during the 2025 season. Photo/Todd Forrest

for greasing the wheels of his Union County hire.

"Coach Walker has a lot of good friends in Union County," he said. "So when the [Union] job came open, he brought up my name. So I have to give it up to Coach Walker; he was a big help."

Furthermore, his high school coach is responsible for helping Stowe's coaching career get off the ground at Gilmer, where Walker served as head coach before Stephens County.

"I spent my first 11 years as a coach in Ellijay," Stowe said. "I met my wife there and all three of my kids were born there."

Stowe eventually served

as the head coach of Gilmer from 2003-2006, going 7-33.

Later, he worked as an assistant at Franklin County, Rabun County and Stephens County.

"I was really able to grow as a coach in my six years at Rabun County under [head coach] Lee Shaw," he said. "Everything I believe in and everything I do is based on what I learned at Rabun under Coach Shaw."

Stowe, who has earned a reputation as a defensive-minded coach in recent years, originally served as Rabun's offensive coordinator during a large chunk of the Wildcats' decade of dominance in Region 8-AA from 2012-2021, which included several heavyweight

showdowns with Union County.

"I want to run the exact same offense [at Union] that I ran at Rabun County, where we scored a lot of points," he said. "Even standing on the other sideline [facing Union County], I always thought 'the same ingredients we have at Rabun, are also standing over there on that Union sideline.'"

"My goal [at Union] is to be the big boy on the mountaintop. I want to be the school that everyone in the mountains looks up to as the best program."

After a brief stop at Stephens County as defensive coordinator, Stowe departed the mountains for south Georgia ahead of the 2019 season.

"We had a great run at Wilcox County," he said. "We had some great players that bought into what we did and we won a lot of ball games. But when the Union County job came open, I felt that's where God wants me to be."

Stowe added that while there are still a lot of decisions to be made regarding how he fills out his coaching staff, he says it's very likely he will handle the defensive coordinator responsibilities, at least in year one.

"The first half of my career, I was an offensive coach, but personally, right now, I love defense more than anything," he said. "It's my passion. I know what these offensive guys

are trying to do and I want to take away what they do best. I've been on both sides of the ball, and I think that gives me a different perspective."

Stowe met with the Union County players and potential assistants currently employed by Union County schools on Monday.

"I always come in giving every player a clean slate, and I will do the same with coaches from the [previous] staff," he said. "We'll take a look and see if any of those are a good fit, and hopefully they will be. I've coached against some of those guys in the past and I know what they bring to the table. But I think we're going to get it all hammered out pretty soon."

His official start date is March 1 but Stowe is already making plans for spring practice and says he's been in talks with local coaches about a potential spring game.

"This first spring we're going to try and get a lot of things installed, but I'll be honest with you, these kids don't play the game of football to go to practice every single day, so it would be good to get them a game -- give them something to look forward to," he said. "And as a coach, I'd like to see how they respond under the lights."

In closing, Stowe thanked Union County Superintendent John Hill and the Union County Board of Education for the opportunity, while delivering a unifying message to the people of Union County.

"I can assure that I'm going to be out in the community and I want to rub shoulders with everybody," he said. "I want to see you at Ingles, I want to see you at church, I'm going to be there for the rec games, the whole nine yards. The way I see it, we're trying to build a program, not just a football team, and I believe we're going to do that and everyone will be very proud when it's all said and done."

# Lady Panthers season ends in Sweet 16 at No. 1 Murray County

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The No. 16 Lady Panthers (19-12) won a State playoff game in consecutive seasons for the first time in 51 years via their fourth victory in two months over No. 17 Coahulla Creek on Tuesday, Feb. 18.

However, Union County's season came to a close Friday at No. 1 Murray County courtesy of an 81-42 loss.

"I'm so proud of our seniors and their leadership, especially the captains," Union County head coach Thomas Nelson said. "Hensley Adams didn't get to play this season, but she was still a captain because of how hard she worked. Even after her injury, she was still at every practice."

"Aubrie Akins is another captain. How much she improved from last year is awesome. Hope Taylor has improved tremendously to the point she's even gotten a couple of college offers. Those three really led this team the most and they led by example."

**No. 16 Lady Panthers 48, No. 17 Coahulla Creek 42** - In her final home game, senior Ariel McCarter delivered a game-sealing 3-pointer during a contest that saw the Union guard finish with 18 points, four rebounds, four steals and three assists.

"Anytime you play a solid team four times, it's tough to beat them all four times," Coach Nelson said. "[Coahulla] put in a new press [defense], and with our point guard [Regan Trlica] hurt, our girls had to adjust, and I think we did a pretty good job adjusting."

"Ariel McCarter has really stepped up. Without Regan she's had to be our primary ball handler and leading scorer, and teams have adjusted to that and started pressing us."

With Union locked in a 43-39 dogfight with under a minute left, McCarter pulled down a rebound on the defensive end, then drilled a clutch trey with 45 seconds to play.

The Colts banked in a triple on the other end but senior Aubrie Akins put the game away by scoring underneath with 12 seconds on the clock.

"Aubrie's bucket was huge," Coach Nelson said. "After Ariel's 3 and Aubrie's bucket, we felt like we had a pretty good handle on things at that point."

The Lady Panthers, who had already defeated Coahulla Creek three times, including a 31-point victory a week earlier during the Region 7-AA tournament, ran into a determined Colts squad in the final meeting.



Seniors Aubrie Akins (L) and Ariel McCarter (R) delivered two clutch baskets during the final 45 seconds of Union's first-round win over Coahulla Creek. Photos/Todd Forrest

the third straight year.

"The State Tournament turned into another region tournament for us," Coach Nelson said. "We have a lot of respect for [Murray County] and they have a lot of respect for us. But it's still tough losing to someone that's nice to you."

The Lady Panthers trailed 17-14 but Murray opened up some breathing room in the second at 33-21.

But the second half was all Lady Indians, breaking things open at 60-30.

"We played hard, but once we got down 10, it seemed like Murray starting hitting every shot they took," Coach Nelson said. "Once they starting hitting those 3s it really stretched out our matchup zone even more and it was too tough on us."

Taylor finished with 13 points and five rebounds; McCarter went for 9 points, two boards and two assists.

Dyer had 6 points, five rebounds and a steal. Brown had 4 points, seven assists, five rebounds and a block. Adams added 4 points.

Aubrie Akins ended with 3 points, three rebounds, a steal and an assist. Hood had 2 points, two boards and a steal. Nomi Nelson added a free throw. Tatum Fisher dished out an assist.

Still up 41-37 inside two minutes, Brown chased down an offensive board and awarded her team another possession that ended with an Adams layup. Coahulla answered with two free throws, setting the stage for McCarter's trey.

Adams finished with 8 points, six rebounds, two blocks, a steal and an assist. Brown had 6 points, 10 boards, three assists and three steals. Dyer ended her night with 5 points, six rebounds, two assists and a steal. Taylor added 4 points, five boards and two blocks.

Akins had 4 points and five boards; McKenna Hood went for 4 points, six rebounds and four assists. Ella Akins chipped in a rebound and a steal.

**No. 16 Lady Panthers 48, No. 17 Coahulla Creek 42** - The Lady Panthers were no match for a red-hot Lady Indians squad that hit 17 of 25 from 3-point range, ending Union's season at Murray County for



# Rec basketball honored at County Meeting



T-B: 12U girls, 12U boys and 14U boys were recognized for their MAC championships on Thursday, Feb. 20