

# Sports

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## XC: Hunter, Union girls third at State Championships

### Hillman takes seventh, leads Union guys to sixth place finish

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
[sports@nganews.com](mailto:sports@nganews.com)

**Carrollton** - Junior Lola Hunter placed third to lead the Union County ladies to a bronze medal performance - their highest team finish in program history during Saturday's Class AA State Championships at Carrollton High School.

Earlier in the day, sophomore Oliver Hillman turned in a seventh-place finish in the guys' race as Union County took home sixth.

Unfortunately, Hunter took a spill during the final mile of the girls' race when a group of Pike County boys' runners, who had already raced, cut across the course and contacted Union's leader, costing her at least 15-20 seconds and preventing her from challenging for second.

"She was knocked down onto all fours and she was spiked on the back of the leg," Union County Cross Country coach Paige Dyer said. "It didn't cost her a state championship, but the girl in second finished 30 seconds ahead of her, so it possibly cost her second place."

"She was at full speed and never saw them coming. It was like a blindsight block in football. I've been to that state meet probably 12 times and I've never seen anything like that happen before. Never."

Hunter finished at 20 minutes, 54 seconds, a half-minute back of second-place Leah Nyce of Savannah Arts Academy (20:24) and 73 seconds behind the winner, Olivia DiQuattro of Columbus (19:41).

Junior Avery Hussion crossed the line in 41st at 26:08; freshman Macy Payne was 46th with a time of 26:13; senior Lydia Wagner placed 47th at 26:14; junior Averie Tanner was 49th at 26:19.

Freshman Kate Barrett came in 62nd with a time of 27:24 and senior Katie Payne was 72nd at 28:02.

The Union girls finished with 175 points, seven points better than fourth-place East



Union County recorded its highest girls team finish in Saturday's State Championship. Photo/Todd Forrest



Lola Hunter (T) and Oliver Hillman (B) on Saturday. Photo/Todd Forrest



The Union County men finished sixth overall on Saturday in Carrollton. Photo/Todd Forrest

Jackson (182), which edged the Panthers at Sectionals seven days prior.

Savannah Arts took home first with 34 points, just ahead of Columbus High (37). Morgan County rounded out the top five with 194 points.

Region 7-AA's Coahulla Creek (214) was sixth; Booker T Washington (223) came in seventh; Pike County (240) was eighth; Franklin County (241) was ninth and Hart County (280) finished 10th.

Hunter topped fourth-place Frances Tedder (21:19) of Savannah Arts and fifth-place Alyna Gilbert (21:35) of

Columbus.

In the guys' race, Hillman finished two spots better than his 9th-place performance at sectionals with a time of 18:09.

"Oliver has continued to improve," Dyer said. "He was projected to finish 17th so we are very proud of him. He's a young runner and he's really started coming into his own. He's just starting to realize how much potential he has."

Hillman edged East Jackson's Cade Brown (18:14) by five seconds and ended up two ticks back of KIPP Atlanta's Jayden White (18:07).

Other Union County run-

ners included Andrew Nush-tayev in 35th at 19:35; Noah James Payne in 50th at 20:12; Cole Brown in 56th at 20:17; Ander Faulkner in 61st at 20:22; Bryson Brooks in 65th at 20:25; Trey Hawley placed 70th at 20:32.

East Jackson took home the state title with 55 points and KIPP Atlanta was second with 92. Crisp County's 153 points were good enough for third; Hart County placed fourth with 169; Savannah Arts was fifth at 195.

Union County's 200 points put them in sixth; Franklin County was seventh at 215;

Rockmart had 226 and came in eighth; Columbus was ninth with 235 and Jackson High was 10th with 277.

Union County expects to return its top seven runners in 2025 while the ladies should bring back five of its top seven from a season that featured several inexperienced runners while entering a new region. With both squads exceeding expectations, Coach Dyer has high hopes for the future.

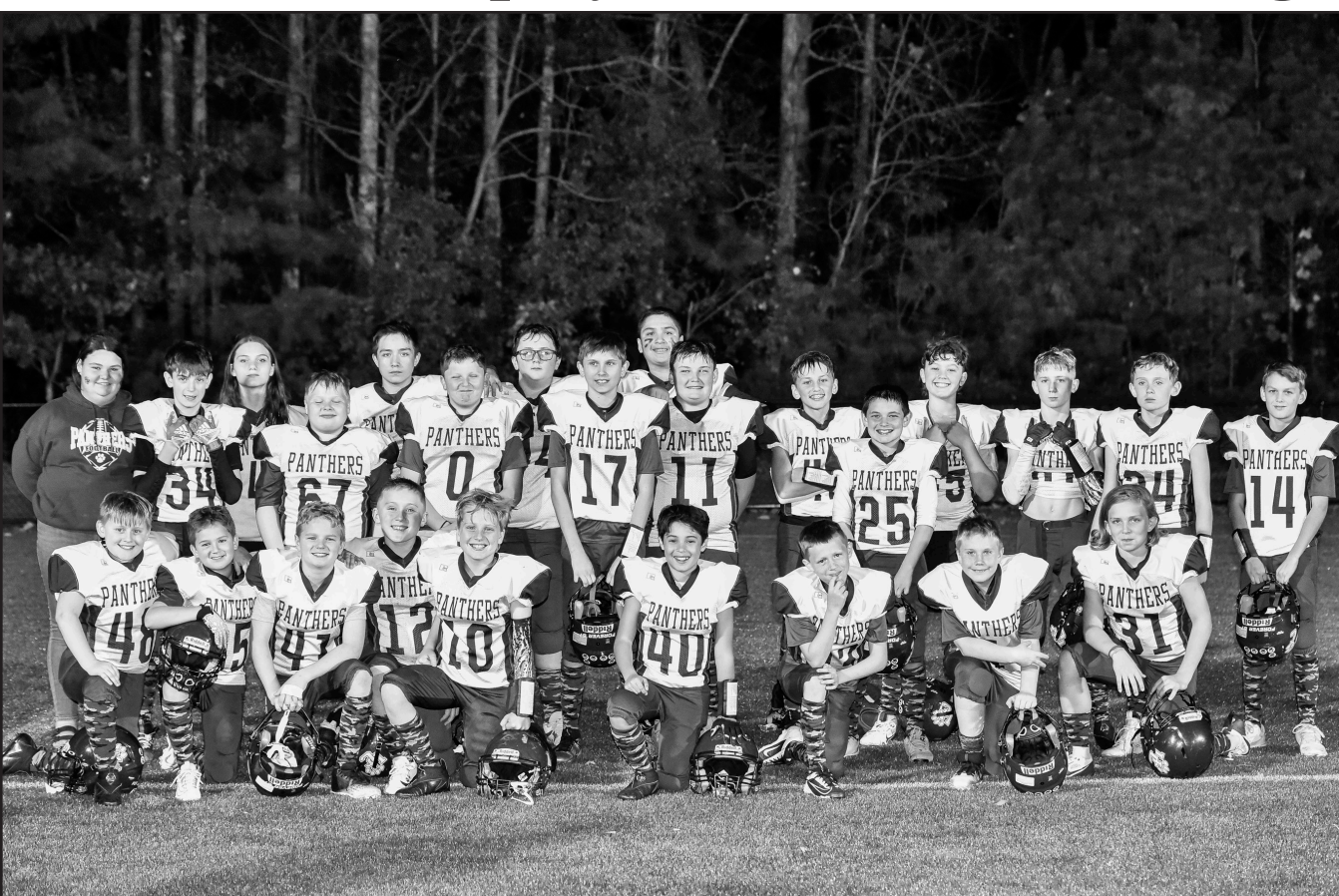
"We are losing two seniors from our top-seven girls, but we absolutely feel good about the program going into next year," Dyer said. "The

five girls we have returning are strong and we have a couple girls on JV that were close [to breaking the top seven]."

"The boys had no seniors on the state team, and one senior overall. We have one junior, a bunch of sophomores and a couple freshmen, so we're hoping they can get on the podium (top four) next year."

"I appreciate the support from our school administration, the parents and the community. They rallied behind us and the kids could feel that. It inspired them to go out and represent Union County and do their best."

## UCRD football playoff brackets set; 6th grade secures No. 1 seed



The Union County 6th grade team (pictured) is one of the recreation department teams that qualified for the postseason. Along with the 2nd and 4th grade teams, the 6th grade will begin their hunt for a Super Bowl appearance on Saturday. This weekend, the Union County 2nd grade team, which scored a win over Dawson County in the season finale, will face Lumpkin County at 10:30 a.m. in Blue Ridge. The 4th graders lost a double-OT heartbreaker at Dawson but still qualified for the postseason and will meet Dawson in a rematch on Saturday at 1:30 p.m. in Jasper. The 6th grade also has a rematch with Dawson at 4:30 p.m. Saturday in Blue Ridge. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County 6th-grade receiver Ethan Liberatore looks for an opening behind the blocking of Sawyer Fox. Photo/Todd Forrest  
The Union County 6th grade pulled away from Dawson County in a 24-6 victory to secure the No. 1 seed with a 7-1 record. Tied at 0-0 with under a minute left in the first half, Union's Parker Dillinger picked off a Tigers' pass deep in the red zone, and on the very next play, broke an 86-yard touchdown run, spotting Union an 8-0 edge following Fox's 2-point PAT. Dillinger added another TD run on the Panthers' opening drive of the third quarter for a 16-0 lead before quarterback Colton Sandler put the game away via an option keeper in the fourth quarter. The Panthers face Dawson again at 4:30 p.m. Saturday at Fannin County High.



# Basketball: No. 9 Panthers open Thursday at Towns County

## Hogsed, Payne lead Union in 77-64 scrimmage win over Gilmer

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

Union County basketball begins its 2024-25 season at Towns County on Thursday, Nov. 14, following last week's scrimmage win over Gilmer.

Initially scheduled for Nov. 15, the contest at Towns County was rescheduled due to Union County football's playoff game at Sumter County.

Under sixth-year coach Corey Garrett, the Union County men open at No. 9 in Class AA despite returning only two full-time starters, seniors Houston Henry and Hayden Hughes, from last year's 21-win region runner-up squad. As of August, the Panthers expected to bring back its entire seven-man rotation from 2023-24, but injuries and transfers have sliced into the depth chart.

Headlining the departures is 1,000-point scorer Jude Ellis, who transferred to Gainesville's Lakeview Academy before the start of the school year. Ellis was second on the team at just under 14 points a game in 2023-24.

Meanwhile, junior Cade Dockrey suffered a torn ACL during football and will miss the 2024-25 season. Dockrey was among the Panthers' top four in nearly every statistical category during his first season as a starter.

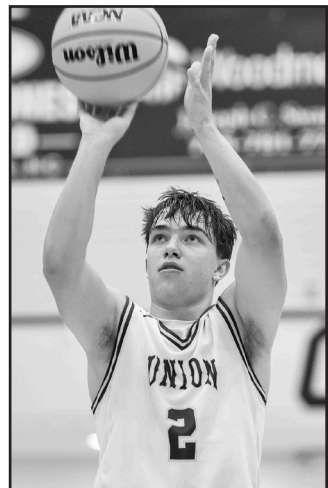
Finally, 6-foot-4, 245-pound sophomore Jaxon Totherow will spend the coming months focusing on his football future. As Union's



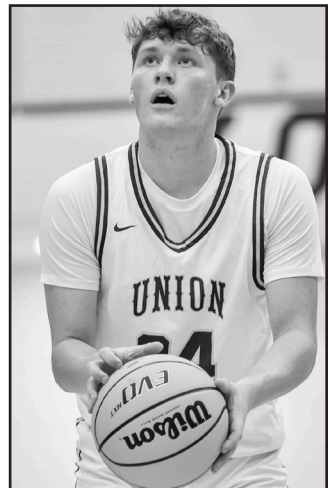
Junior guard Holden Payne scored 16 points in Union's scrimmage victory over Gilmer on Tuesday, Nov. 5. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore guard Ethan Hogsed finished with 16 points during the scrimmage win vs. Gilmer. Photo/Todd Forrest



Houston Henry



Hayden Hughes

starting left tackle on the gridiron, Totherow is already drawing attention from major college programs and will spend the winter months adding weight.

Totherow started in the post for most of his freshman basketball campaign, averaging 6.3 points, 4.2 rebounds and shooting 59% from the floor.

However, Union County still returns plenty of experience in the post with senior

Kaden Combs and junior Vince Marevka. Both served as spot starters in 2023-24 with Combs averaging 5 points and 5 boards a night with his standout performance coming in a 15-point, 9-rebound game during a January win over Fannin County.

Marevka started four games in November 2023 while Totherow and Combs were still with the football team. Marevka went for 13 points and 13 rebounds vs. Putnam County after opening the year with a 12-rebound outing at Rabun County.

Leading the way for Union County this year are the its two returning starters: Henry and Hughes.

Henry is back for his fourth year as Union County's starting point guard and is 60 points away from reaching 1,000. Henry was tops on the team as a junior, averaging 19 points, 6 assists, 2.5 steals and shooting 77% at the foul line.

Hughes led the team with 5.6 rebounds a game and was third at 13.3 points in 2023-24. After breaking the school record for 3-pointers in a season with 92 as a sophomore, he

knocked down 78 as a junior and is expected to break the program's career 3-point mark.

The senior forward is also on pace to reach 1,000 points late in the year as he enters less than 300 away.

With the loss of Dockrey and Ellis in the backcourt, expect senior Maddox Young and sophomore Ethan Hogsed to slide into those spots. Young, a starter during Union's Sweet 16 run in 2022-23, missed the first half of his junior year and returned in a limited role off the bench. As soon as Young returns from football, he should be back to being a key component of the Panthers' lineup.

Hogsed, a talented sophomore, appeared in only nine varsity games as a freshman but led the JV team in scoring. And that appears to be carrying over this season. Hogsed scored 16 points during Union's scrimmage to share leading-scorer honors with another underclassman: Junior guard Holden Payne.

Payne appeared in six games a year ago but will be one of Garrett's first options off the bench in a deep backcourt.

Sophomore sharpshooter Hayden Price should see more playing time this winter while his 6-foot-5 frame is a bonus, especially for an undersized squad. Sophomore Ryland Chambers is another 3-point threat who has played his way into a larger role this season.

In the 77-64 scrimmage win over Gilmer, Hogsed and Payne led the way with 16 points. Henry and Marevka had 14 apiece; Hughes scored eight; Chambers had six and Price added three. Junior Kainen Shirley also saw action but didn't crack the scoring column.

**Around the region:** The Panthers enter Region 7-AA as the top public program behind a loaded North Cobb Christian squad that is heavily favored in the new region. Union opens region play on Dec. 6 vs a Sonarville team that won 20 games in Class AAAA but graduated seven seniors.

Rockmart returns three starters from a 20-win team, but the two departed seniors accounted for 42 points, 14 rebounds, 6 assists and over 6 treys a game.

CLASS 2A				
BOYS	SCHOOL	RECORD	MOVEMENT	
#1	COLUMBIA	1-0	--	
#2	CARVER-COLUMBUS	1-0	--	
#3	BUTLER	0-0	--	
#4	SOUTH ATLANTA	0-0	--	
#5	SPENCER	0-0	--	
#6	WESTSIDE-MACON	0-0	--	
#7	THOMSON	0-0	--	
#8	HART COUNTY	0-0	--	
#9	UNION COUNTY	0-0	--	
#10	FRANKLIN COUNTY	0-0	--	

# Lady Panthers eye Region title, playoff run in year-two under Nelson

By Todd Forrest  
Sports Editor  
sports@nganews.com

The Union County Lady Panthers and second-year coach Thomas Nelson have raised their expectations after finishing 17-12 in 2023-24, advancing to the Region 8-AA title game and the Class AA Sweet 16.

"Our expectations are always high," Nelson said. "This year looks a lot different with six seniors, who have been here for a while and have game experience. That makes it a lot easier for us."

Entering Thursday's season opener at Towns County, Union brings back a solid senior nucleus this winter in All-Region selections Kateltn Brown and Ariel McCarter, along with 6-foot-1 post Hope Taylor.

Unfortunately, the Lady Panthers bid farewell to graduated seniors Kamryn Mull, Lara Turner and Morgan Warren along with Paula Robertson, who transferred to Gilmer over the summer.

Turner, a four-year starter was slowed by injuries during her senior season, paving the way for a breakout year from Taylor. Mull, who started two years at point guard, shot



Regan Trlica scored 10 points in the scrimmage loss. Photo/Todd Forrest

34% from 3-point range to lead the team.

But Robinson's transfer might be the biggest blow after she ended 2023-24 second on the team in scoring (11 ppg) and assists (2.1 apg).

As for Union's returning starters, McCarter topped

1,000 career points during last year's playoff win over Landmark Christian and wrapped up her junior campaign leading the team in points (13.7), assists (2.6) and steals (2.7).

Brown provides Coach Nelson with a non-stop motor at the forward position in her third season in the starting five. Brown averaged 6 points, 8 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 steals and 1 blocked shot per game a season ago.

Taylor, meanwhile, came on strong down the stretch for Union County, scoring 15 points and pulling down 7 boards during her team's near-upset at a top-five Murray County during the Sweet 16. She ended her junior year at 6 points and 5 rebounds a night.

Senior Sloane Dyer is expected to slide into the starting lineup after providing a spark off the bench the last two seasons. Last December, she came off the bench to knock down three 3-pointers and score 11 points in a win at Murphy, North Carolina.

"It'll be big having Sloane," Coach Nelson said. "She's just getting back from a successful softball season and we expect big things from her this year."

The Lady Panthers will likely start four seniors this



Ariel McCarter drives past former teammate Paula Robertson during the scrimmage. McCarter scored 10 points and Robertson finished with 18. Photo/Todd Forrest

winter, but the lone underclassman, sophomore Regan Trlica, is certainly one to keep an eye on. During her freshman season, she showed flashes of potential with her ball handling and court vision, but the new point guard emerged during the summer camps, proving she's a more than capable scorer as well.

"She has really stepped forward," Coach Nelson said. "She's done a lot this summer to get better. She's another one our team that is leading us in the right direction."

Union did suffer a blow during the scrimmage loss to Gilmer when senior Hensley Adams sustained a serious knee injury that ended her final year prematurely.

"That really hurts us," Coach Nelson said. "She was one of our captains and one of our leaders. She had really stepped up and we were expecting a big year out of her. She was here everyday during the offseason and it's really sad when a kid that works that hard has that type of injury."

Others expected to take on a larger role in 2024-25 are senior Aubrie Akins and junior Mady Adams in the low post, along with sophomore guards

Ragan McCarter and Nomi Nelson.

In addition, forwards Tatum Fisher (junior) and McKenna Hood (sophomore) could make contributions after moving up from junior varsity.

With the injury to Hensley Adams, Coach Nelson believes that freshmen Samantha Combs and Livy Haney could be thrust into some varsity minutes to fill the void.

"Those two have shined on the JV team, they're good ball handlers, and with Hensley going down, they could step up and take some of those minutes," he said.

During the 59-45 scrimmage loss to Gilmer, Union County jumped out front 10-0 but Gilmer responded with a 17-2 run and never trailed the rest of the night.

Ariel McCarter and Trlica led the Lady Panthers with 10 points each. Nelson had eight, Taylor added six and Brown scored 4 points.

Dyer finished with 3 points, Ragan McCarter had two, Fisher and Akins scored one apiece.

**Around the region:** As Union County moves over to Region 7-AA, they have some familiarity with the odds-on

favorite Murray County - a team that eliminated the Lady Panthers in each of the last two state playoffs.

The Indians return four starters from last year's Final Four team and enter the season as the 3rd ranked team in Class AA.

Coahulla Creek is another preseason Top-10 from Region 7-AA. The Colts went 18-9 last year in Class AAA with only two seniors on the roster.

Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe finished 14-10 and won the 6-AAA regular season title behind seven seniors before getting upset in the region semis by Coahulla Creek. Up the road in Ringgold, the Tigers, led by three seniors, ended last season at 16-13 following a 70-38 first-round playoff loss at White County.

Sonoraville won 16 games, a region title and made a Sweet 16 appearance in Class AAAA and graduated only two seniors.

North Murray went 12-12 and featured a young squad that missed out on the postseason in 2023-24. North Cobb Christian ended last season at 19-9 but graduated three key players. The Eagles are under the direction of former Hiwassee Dam and Murphy, North Carolina head coach Ray Gutierrez.

Union County opens Thursday at Towns County at 5:30 p.m. They visit Habersham Central at 6 p.m. on Saturday, where the Lady Panthers will play after the 4:30 p.m. boys game.

"We're looking to cut down on unproductive possessions," Nelson said. "Too many times down the court we don't get a shot off or turn it over, and we at least want to be able to get off a good shot."

"Right now, it's just locking down a few things before we get into a hard region schedule. We need to use this time to gel and keep our fingers crossed we don't have another injury."

"I'm thankful to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and everyone that's been supportive of our program, like Ingles, Chick-Fil-A and everyone else that has been here for our girls."



Freshman QB Kamden Kendrick leads the Panthers into the first-round of the Class AA State playoffs where No. 24 Union County travels to No. 9 Sumter County (Americus) at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 15.