

Sports

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Hunter's career-high 32 propels Lady Panthers past CBHS

Union, Cherokee Bluff men combine for 69 free throw attempts in 75-72 Bears victory

By Todd Forrest
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Flowery Branch - Ava Hunter poured in a career-high 32 points as Union County improved to 3-1 with its first road victory of the year - a 72-57 win at Cherokee Bluff on Tuesday, Nov. 23.

The Lady Panthers fell into an early 8-0 hole but never trailed again after racing ahead 18-16 in the second quarter, eventually building a 32-21 advantage en route to a 34-28 halftime lead.

Despite three fouls apiece on the senior post-duo of Hunter and Rebekah Chambers, Union County maintained a 52-44 margin after three before putting the Bears away with a 14-2 run to begin the final frame.

Sophomore Lara Turner notched a career-best 16 points with five rebounds and a block, while Chambers added 11 points and three steals.

Hunter finished with her third double-double in four games, pulling down 13 rebounds to go with three steals. The University of North Georgia signee shot 11 for 19 overall, 2 for 2 from long distance and 8 for 10 at the charity stripe.

Freshman Ariel McCarter grabbed seven boards, scored 5 points and recorded three steals. Junior Corinne Hill led the Lady Panthers with four steals while chipping in 4 points, four assists and four rebounds.

Kamryn Mull and Sofia McNabb scored 2 points each with four and three rebounds, respectively. McNabb added an assist while Mull finished with one steal.

Union County shot 38% from the floor to Cherokee Bluff's 33% clip. However, the Lady Panthers distanced themselves by outscoring the Bears 40-32 in the paint, 21-11 off turnovers, 17-7 on second chances and 16-0 in transition.

Cherokee Bluff's Gaither sisters (Timber and Taliyah) combined for 34 of their team's 57 points. The Bears came out firing on all cylinders, grabbing an 8-0 lead and hitting 50% (7 for 14) from the field in the first quarter.

After shooting 4 for 10 in the second period, Cherokee Bluff tailed off in the second half, connecting on just 25% (9 of 36) after the break.

Hunter scored nine of her team's 14 first-quarter points to help Union trim an 8-0 deficit to 16-14 after one. The Lady Panthers took their first lead with two free throws by McNabb and a jumper by Turner.

Tied at 18-18, an 8-0 run helped Union open up some breathing room, eventually leading to a 32-21 score.

Still up 32-23 with 32 seconds left in the half, Bluff needed only three seconds to generate a 5-0 spurt that trimmed the difference to 32-28, beginning with a Union foul on a 3-point make. The Bears scored off the missed free throw to cut the lead to four while Chambers and Hunter both sat with three fouls.

The Lady Panthers answered with an inbounds lob-pass to Turner for a tip-in, spotting Union a 34-28 half-



Senior post Ava Hunter (45) scores in the paint during her 32-point, 13-rebound performance at Cherokee Bluff last Tuesday, Nov. 23. Photo/Todd Forrest

time advantage. Chambers and Hunter returned and converted a pair of turnovers into points to build a 38-30 lead early in the third. Baskets by Turner and Hunter kept the margin at eight before Chambers pushed the difference to 45-36 with a 1-for-2 trip to the line.

Another tip by Turner and two free throws by Hunter opened up a 52-41 lead, but Bluff closed the third with a 3-point play to remain within eight.

Union put the game away with a 14-2 run to start the fourth, sparked by a fast-break deuce from Turner and consecutive put-backs by Hunter. Turner sank a jumper and a McCarter dribble-drive saw the Lady Panthers grab a 62-46 advantage.

Consecutive Bluff turnovers resulted in a 20-point margin following layups from Turner and Hunter. Later in the fourth, Hunter sank her second trey of the night - a corner-3 at the 1:13 mark that handed Union its largest lead at 72-51.

Panthers 72, Cherokee Bluff 75 - The Union County men suffered a 75-72 loss in a see-saw contest at Cherokee Bluff that saw the two squads combine for 69 free throw attempts.

The Bears survived courtesy of a late go-ahead 3-point basket, breaking a 72-72 tie with 11 seconds to play. The Panthers were able to get off a 3-attempt with time winding down but Hughes' shot from the top of the circle came up short.

Union County played without seniors Landon Kight and Austin Taylor as the Bears' talented backcourt took advantage of the resulting defensive holes on the perimeter and at the basket. Attacking Union County early and often with dribble drives and outside shooting, combined with a pressure defense, the Cherokee Bluff guards put Panthers head coach Corey Garrett behind the 8-ball right off the bat.

"We knew coming in [that Cherokee Bluff] had two really good players, and

we knew we could guard them, we just had to find the right matchups," Garrett said. "We ended up making some switches and put Houston [Henry] and Caleb [John on their two best players] and it clearly disrupted [Cherokee Bluff's] offensive rhythm and got us back into the game.

"We also figured out how to handle [Cherokee Bluff's] pressure defense. Playing Rabun Gap was huge for us even though we lost by 40-plus. Just seeing that pressure [at Rabun Gap] helped because when Cherokee Bluff jumped on us with their pressure, we had already seen [a better defense]."

Union managed to hang around in the first half behind 12 points by freshman Jude Ellis and 9 from senior Lake Hughes, resulting in a 31-28 halftime deficit. In the second half, senior guard Caleb John, who made his first appearance of 2021-22 after the close of football season, seized the reins of the Panthers offense and helped the visitors cut into a 50-44 margin.

John scored Union's final 5 points of the third to remain within two scores at 53-49 entering the fourth. Down 55-49 early in the period, John continued attacking the basket, returning to the line for his 6th and 7th consecutive points.

Following a Bluff basket, Hughes drew a foul on a 3-point try and hit all three from the stripe. But John picked up his fifth foul with 5:21 to play, as things started looking bleak for Union, trailing 63-57.

With freshman Houston Henry in foul trouble and Taylor unavailable, Garrett turned to first-year varsity player Braylen Rader, who totaled just one minute of floor-time during his team's previous two contests. Undeterred by the hostile road atmosphere, the sophomore went on to hit 5 of 6 at the line down the stretch, including a 3-pointer to finish with 10 points and spark the struggling Panthers on both ends of the floor.

"Braylen has been right there, really close [to cracking

the rotation]," Garrett said. "I had a talk with him a week or two ago and told him, 'you're right there, you just need to catch a break.' And I think Tuesday night was his break, he took advantage of it."

Still in Bluff's rearview, 64-57 inside of four minutes, Union trimmed the difference to 64-63 with 3:22 to play thanks to back-to-back 3s from Ellis and Rader.

Just over a minute later, Underwood scored and drew a foul to put Union in front 65-64. The junior missed the ensuing free throw but Rader crashed the boards and was fouled, resulting in a 2-for-2 trip and a 67-64 advantage.

Bluff momentarily knotted the score at 67-67, hitting 3 of 4 at the line over its next two possessions, but on its lone miss, Rader drew an over-the-back foul, sending the sophomore to the line with 1:45 remaining.

Rader calmly sank both attempts but Bluff responded by going to the line 13 seconds later where they split two tries. Rader pushed the Union edge back to two at 70-68 with a 1-for-2 visit to the line, but the Bears immediately attacked the basket, drawing Henry's fifth foul at the 1:06 mark.

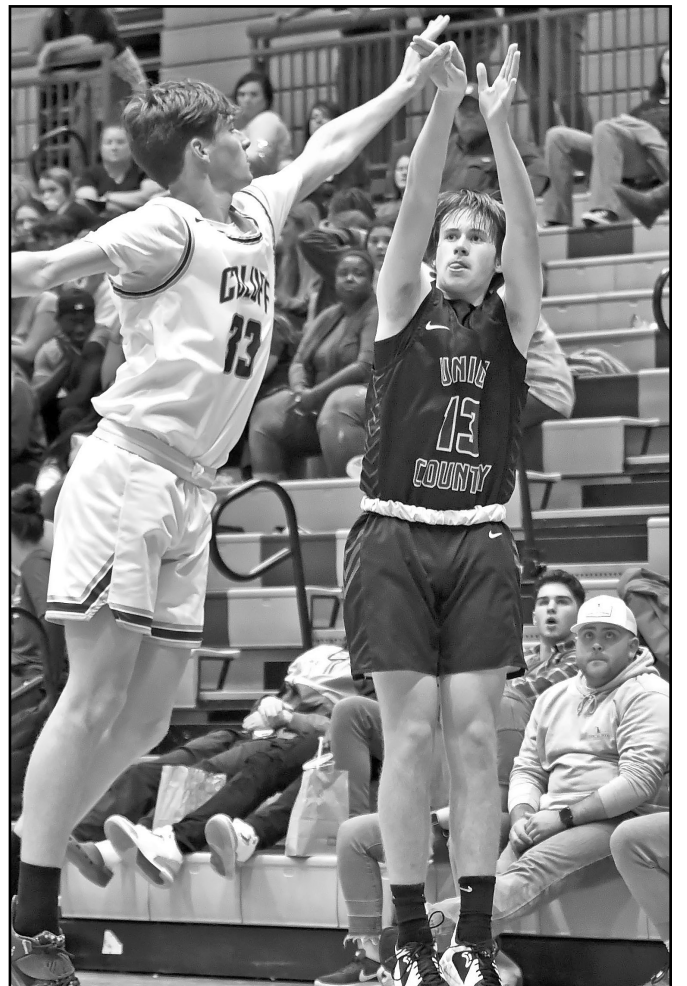
Two free throws later, the game was tied once again at 70-70, but a Union miss coming out of a timeout allowed Bluff to regain the lead with a dribble-drive as the clock ticked under 45 seconds.

Underwood scored down low with 25 seconds to play in what would be his team's final points of the night. Tied at 72-72, a Bluff kick-out resulted in an open trey with 11 seconds left.

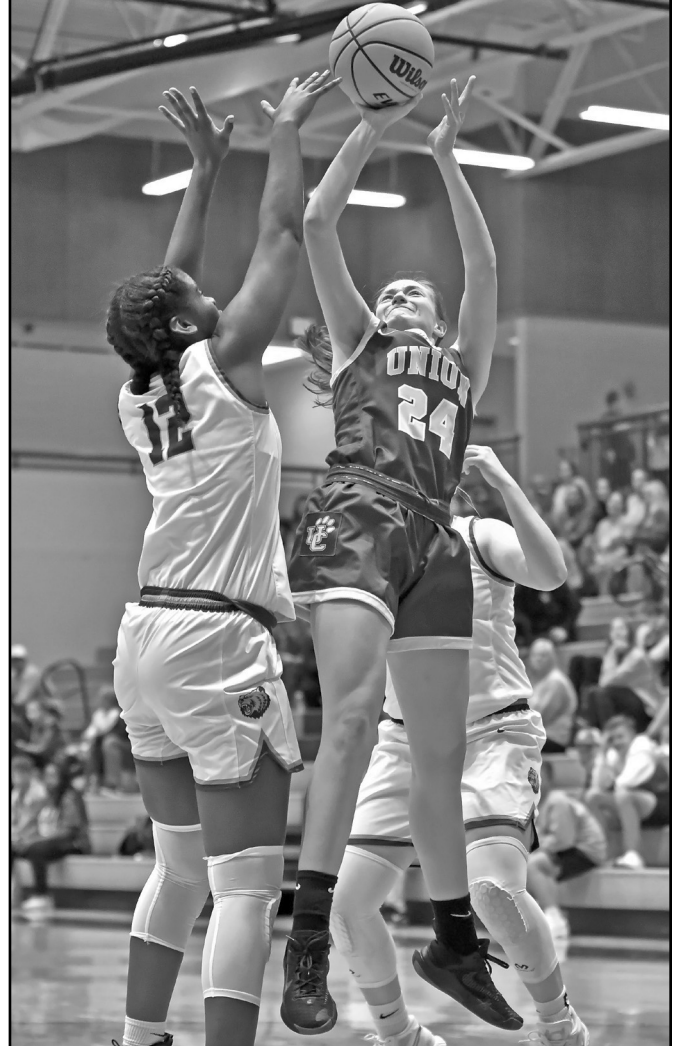
Union raced up the floor and called a timeout after crossing halfcourt with 6 seconds-and-change remaining.

Hughes was able to get a decent look from 22-feet away but his shot came up just short. Underwood corralled the miss but time expired before the Panthers could attempt another trey.

Like the ladies, the Union men fell into an early hole, trailing 17-9 less than



Jude Ellis (13) launches a 3 at Cherokee Bluff last Tuesday. The freshman wing tallied 35 points in two games last week. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Lara Turner (24) scored a career-best 16 points and secured five boards in last Tuesday's win at Cherokee Bluff. Photo/Todd Forrest

six minutes into the contest. Ellis and Hughes kept the Panthers close, scoring all 13 of Union's points in an 18-13 first frame.

Bluff's largest lead of the night came at 23-14 approaching the 5-minute mark of the second, but Underwood and John each sank a pair of free throws to cut the margin to 23-18.

Ellis hit 5 of 6 at the line to cut the deficit to 27-23 just inside of two minutes. Consecutive Bears' baskets resulted in 31-23 score, but Hughes accounted for the half's final 5 points with a triple and two free throws.

Bluff extended its lead to 35-28 early in the third but an and-one from Underwood and an Ellis deuce brought the Panthers within two.

Hughes' baseline drive resulted in two free throws

that evened the score at 35-35 near the 5-minute mark of the period. Moments later, Hughes answered a Bluff score with a corner-3 that gave Union its first lead of the night at 38-37.

Underwood crashed the offensive glass to keep the Panthers in front 40-39 but the Bears used an 11-4 run to storm ahead 50-44 with 2:20 left in the third.

Ellis finished with a career-high 19 points and Hughes scored 17. Underwood had 11 points - nine coming after halftime, while John and Rader finished with 10 points each.

Senior Daniel Snow scored 4 points and Henry added a free throw.

For a recap of last Friday's UCHS basketball action, see Page 3B.

Baseball: Union County grad Carter Wright leaving Iowa for the Plains

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Council Bluffs Iowa - Former Panthers baseball stand-out Carter Wright is joining the Auburn Tigers following a breakout season at Iowa Western Community College.

Wright hit .353 while driving in 27 in 43 games behind the plate for the Reivers baseball program in 2021.

The Blairsville native began his college career in Council Bluffs by reaching safely in 23 times in his first 11 games, hitting .615 with 6 RBIs over that stretch. Defensively, Wright cut down nine of 23 base stealers, however, the 2020 UCHS grad believes his biggest adjustment from high school to college didn't involve a bat or a mitt.

"It's definitely a faster game [at the college level] and it's much more of a grind," he said. "We practice seven days a week for 3-4 hours a day so I had to learn how to compete everyday, even when I'm not at my best."

"But the biggest thing I had to learn [as a college catcher] was how to be a leader. The pitcher and the rest of the guys on the field are looking at you to lead, so you find out right away that you need leadership skills."

According to Wright, one aspect of SEC baseball that will



Blairsville's Carter Wright is headed to the SEC as a member of War Eagle nation. Photo/Instagram

come easier than at his previous stop: The January practices in Alabama will feel more like home than the upper Midwest.

"We're stuck inside for the first month-and-a-half of practices [in Iowa] just because of snow and cold," he said. "Luckily, we have a \$15 million indoor facility."

While playing baseball in the fall, Wright found himself on Auburn's radar -- then he paid a visit to the campus and the rest

is history. "[Auburn] was definitely the frontrunner," he said. "I looked at other schools, but none of them offered me [a scholarship] and I didn't want to wait around."

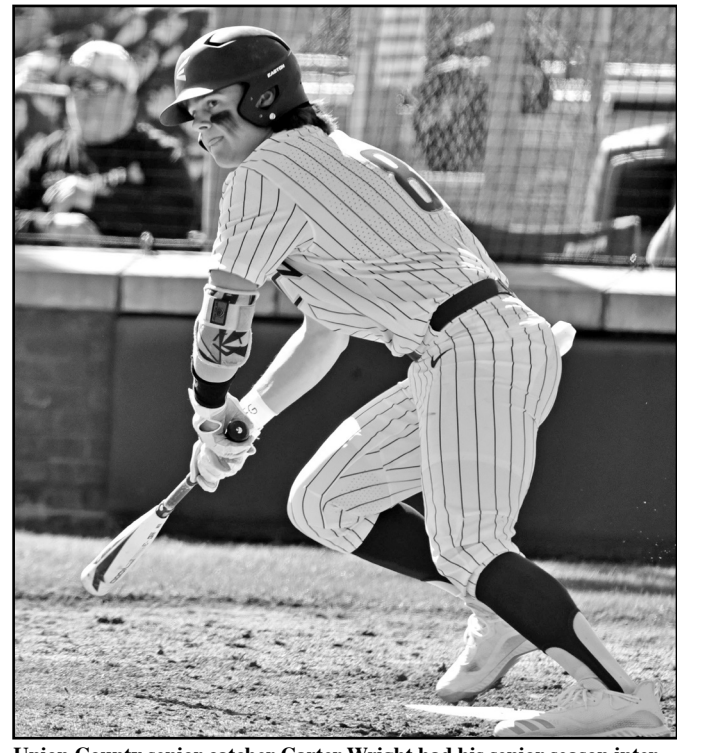
"[Auburn's] coaching staff is second-to-none, they have [former Atlanta Brave] Tim Hudson as the pitching coach. And Butch Thompson, the head coach, I liked him a lot, plus, the town in general gave me a small-

town vibe.

"They also have a reputation for getting catchers drafted and I know I'll be catching good pitchers, that's always a plus."

For now, Wright hopes to play baseball as long as possible. And if a professional future isn't in the cards, a degree from Auburn will provide a solid backup plan.

"I want to be a landscape architect major but I might add a minor in Business or something



Union County senior catcher Carter Wright had his senior season interrupted due to COVID-19. Through 12 games in early 2020, Wright was slashing .324/.405/.411 while leading the team in both RBIs (10) and doubles (4). Photo/Todd Forrest

along that pathway," he said.

Since the age of 7, Wright has spent most of his playing time behind the plate. And according to the lifelong backstop, finding success at a demanding position wouldn't have happened without tons of help.

"I definitely want to thank my family and [former Young Harris baseball coach] Rick Robinson. He helped me a lot grow-

ing up and at Iowa Western."

Additionally, Wright included a few professional catchers that he's admired.

"I've always liked guys like Salvador Perez (Kansas City) and Yadier Molina (St. Louis). But back when I was younger, I was a huge fan of Brian McCann (Atlanta). He was my idol in the catching world."

Basketball: Hunter nets 30 points, 17 rebounds in Showcase win

Union County men's late rally comes up short vs. Wilson Academy

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Flowers Branch - North Georgia participated in the North Georgia Basketball Showcase on Friday, Nov. 26, leaving with a split when the Lady Panthers defeated Cherokee Bluff 56-46 and the Panthers dropped a low-scoring contest, 45-42 to Wilson Academy.

In their second trip to Cherokee Bluff in three days, the Lady Panthers improved to 4-1 on the year behind Ava Hunter's second straight 30-point double-double.

After scoring a career-high 32 vs. Cherokee Bluff on Tuesday, Hunter scored 30 in the rematch, pulling down 17 boards while hitting 10 of 16 from the floor, 10 for 11 at the line, blocking three shots and dishing out three assists.

Two Hunter free throws to begin the fourth quarter spotted Union its largest lead of the day at 45-27, but the Bears rebounded with a 12-1 run to trim the advantage to 46-39 with 5:37 remaining.

Corinne Hill connected from the baseline moments later but Cherokee Bluff answered with a layup, then took advantage of a Union turnover to split a pair of free throws and narrow the margin to 48-42, just shy of the 4-minute mark.

Hunter pushed the difference back to 10 when the senior received a friendly bounce on a 15-footer and connected on two free throws for a 52-42 lead with 3:10 remaining.

Bluff capitalized on another turnover, trimming the score to 52-45 but a Hunter putback with 62 seconds left put the Bears away for good.

Lara Turner added a pair of late free throws to finish with 11 points and extend the final margin to 56-46. She also grabbed seven rebounds and blocked a shot.

Union County held an 8-6 advantage following a low-scoring first frame that saw Hunter score 4 points, with Turner and



L-R: Lara Turner, Cherokee Bluff's Taliah Gaither, Ava Hunter, Sofia McNabb and Corinne Hill get into rebounding position. Photo/Todd Forrest

senior Rebekah Chambers adding two each.

Leading 10-6 after an offensive board from Hunter, sophomore Sofia McNabb started a fast break off a Bluff miss, pushing the ball to Hill, who fed Hunter for the deuce.

Four-unanswered by Bluff cut the margin to 12-10, but freshman Ariel McCarter split a pair from the charity stripe before Hunter knocked down an 18-footer and scored at the basket to cap another Union break.

Leading 17-10 near the midway point of the second, Hunter jumped into the lane to pick off a Bears' entry pass, eventually hitting Turner in transition for a 19-10 score.

A Bluff 3 sliced the margin to a half dozen, but Hunter scored on a putback and Turner split two free throws with 1:45 on the clock. The Bears trimmed the score to 22-17 until senior Caley Davis sank a jumper from the wing to send Union to the break ahead 24-17.

Two minutes into the third, Cherokee Bluff remained within

five when Chambers fed Hunter from the high post for 2 points.

Union continued taking advantage of the two-player high-low game between the senior posts. With 4:27 on the clock, Chambers gathered a pass to the high post, but this time she kept it herself and drilled a 15-footer from the elbow.

The Lady Panthers went back to the well for a third time on the ensuing possession when Chambers found Hunter on the block for another layup, forcing Cherokee Bluff into a timeout with Union on top 32-23.

Hill opened up her team's first double-digit lead with a layup, then McCarter connected from the corner for a 36-23 score - capping a 10-2 run.

At the 2:10 mark, Hunter followed a Bluff score with a traditional 3-point play, and after two Bears' free throws, Hill pushed the margin back to 14 with a 17-footer from the wing.

Turner closed the third with a jumper out of an inbounds play that built a 43-27 cushion with eight minutes left.

Hill finished with 6 points, five rebounds and four assists.

Chambers had 4 points, four rebounds, three assists and a block. McCarter added 3 points, five boards and four assists; Davis had 2 points and Kamryn Mull pulled down three boards. McNabb ended her day with two rebounds and one assist.

Union shot 40% from the floor while holding Cherokee Bluff under 29%. Additionally, the Lady Panthers hit 84% (14-17) at the foul line and out-rebounded the Bears 47-26.

Union County visits North Hall on Tuesday at 6 p.m. before hosting Class AAA No. 1 Lumpkin County on Thursday at 6 p.m.

The Lady Panthers close the week with a visit to White County on Friday at 7 p.m.

Panthers 42, Wilson Academy 45 - After missing two key players in Tuesday's loss to Cherokee Bluff, the Union men returned to Hall County on Friday minus three important pieces against the reigning GAPPS Division 1-AA State Champion,

Wilson Academy.

The Panthers, who were without the services of senior posts Landon Kight, Daniel Snow and sophomore guard Brayden Rader, were outscored 26-12 during the second, third and early fourth quarters but remained within striking distance late before eventually falling 45-42.

Trailing 35-27 with under seven minutes to play, Union rallied to within three with under 15 seconds to play. Wilson went on to miss the front-end of a 1-and-1 attempt but the Panthers turned it over before getting off a potential game-tying shot.

The freshman duo of Jude Ellis and Houston Henry scored 11 of Union's 15 fourth-quarter points, however, an already thin Union rotation suffered another blow when senior sharpshooter Lake Hughes picked up his fifth foul, exiting the contest with 12 points - four in the fourth.

"We've had really good energy in all of our games, but we just didn't show the same energy [against Wilson]," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "I

think [Wilson] came out slow and that helped us get an early lead, but when [Wilson] turned it on, we just didn't match their same level of intensity."

Ellis poured in a game-high 16 points, giving the 9th grader at least 14 points in three of his first four high school games. Henry finished with 8 and junior Eli Underwood scored 2 points. Seniors Caleb John and Daniel Snow added 2 each.

Ellis sparked the fourth-quarter rally with a dribble-drive layup, followed by a pull-up jumper with 5:09 to play.

Henry crashed the boards following an Ellis miss, drawing a foul on the putback. The freshman guard hit 1 of 2 to trim the deficit to 37-32 with 4:37 remaining.

Wilson extended its lead back to 41-32 when Hughes hit 2 of 2 from the line after an offensive rebound. A Henry steal led to a layup at the 3:08 mark, bringing the Panthers within five. Henry hit two free throws just inside of 2:30 to cut the difference to 41-38, but Wilson answered with consecutive scores, putting the Panthers in a 45-38 hole.

Ellis kept hope alive with two free throws, moving Union back within five at the 1-minute mark. Twenty-five seconds later, Hughes converted a turnover into a layup, making it a one-possession game at 45-42.

Union travels to North Hall on Tuesday and hosts Lumpkin County on Thursday. The girls' contests will begin at 6 p.m. on both days with the guys to follow.

The Panthers visit White County on Friday with the ladies scheduled to tip at 7 p.m.

Rankings update: The Lady Panthers returned to the sandyspiel.com top-10 for the first time since November 2020 when they debuted at No. 7 in this week's Class AA rankings.

Meanwhile, the White County girls dropped from the top-10 after entering the Thanksgiving holiday ranked fifth in Class AAA.

Soccer: Union County U14 travel team claims Georgia Soccer United Cup



Pictured: team captains Jonah Munoz and Kaimen Shirley hoist the cup. The U14 travel soccer team from Blairsville are champions after winning the Georgia Soccer United Cup. The team, comprised of 11, 12 and 13 year olds, traveled to McDonough to compete against the top teams in the state. The TRAC Panthers took on all comers and finished the tournament allowing the fewest goals (4) and scoring the most goals (22) in their bracket.