

Sports

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The Pit resurrected: UC goes old school to cap perfect week

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After sweeping Murphy, NC and Oglethorpe County earlier in the week, The Pit was open for business on Saturday as Andrews, NC came down to Georgia to experience the legend of The Pit first hand.

They learned The Pit shows no bias, in fact, it greets the opposition with the same level of 'southern discomfort' that it offered up to every visiting team from 1969 to 2002.

All one had to do was close their eyes, and it would've been difficult to determine if you were in 1981 or 2001. But in 2014, the Panthers and Lady Panthers didn't disappoint the Union County faithful who packed themselves into the old gym.

"We love our new gym but this will always be our home," said Public Address Announcer Tim Hunter during halftime when Union honored its 1,000 point scorers who played in The Pit.

With a pep band and an exuberant, yet intimidating Pit Crew at their side, the Panthers (9-5, 1-0) pulled away late in a 68-54 win over Andrews, that was much closer than the score would indicate.

"The guys loved the experience of playing there," Union County Head Coach Casey Jones said. "They all talked about how loud it was and how much energy there was. I think it was everything that we had talked it up to be. I wanted them to experience a true 'Pit game' and for the most part, I think they got that."

With the game tied at 48-48, the Panthers used a 20-6 run in the final 6:01, ignited by a Hunter Hughes trey. Following a technical foul on the Wildcat coach and while tempers flared in the bleachers, Coach Jones' squad calmly sealed the deal with an 11-for-14 performance from the charity stripe in the fourth quarter. The junior backcourt duo of Hughes and Kyle Hamby hit 9 of Union's 11 fourth quarter free throws to knock off the Wildcats for the third time this season.

With the electricity supercharged in The Pit, Union County used an early wave of momentum to jump out to a 14-6 lead. Junior Tyler Odom scored seven of his team-high 20 points in the first quarter and the Panthers led 19-11 after one.

The Wildcats stormed back and held a 25-24 lead with 3:42 to play in the half. Two free throws from Odom followed but Andrews regained its slim lead at 27-26.

A putback by Ralston Drake and a jumper by Dylan Coyne gave the Panthers a 30-27 advantage. They would stretch the lead after a trey by Hamby and a free throw from Odom.

Leading 34-30, Odom drove into the paint to extend the lead to 36-30 at the break.

The Wildcats scored six unanswered to open the third quarter but Odom's third trey ended the run. The next 4 points went to Andrews and the Panthers found themselves trailing again at 40-39. Drake answered once more with a short jumper and later hitting 1-for-2 at the stripe.

The Wildcats tied it up but Hamby connected on two from the line then Matthew Wasko rattled home a 15-footer, making it 46-43 entering the fourth.

Drake scored off another offensive board but an Andrews trey tied it at 48 with 6:32 left.

Hughes, Coyne, and Hamby would score 13 of the game's next 16 points, to put Union firmly in control.

Despite battling foul trouble for most of the contest, Hughes finished with 14 points. Coyne scored 11, while Hamby added 9 points, Drake 7 points, Elijah Ryals hit a first quarter trey for 3 points, and Wasko ended up with 2 points.

"The guys are already



The Pit was reawakened for the first time since 2002 when Union hosted Andrews, NC on Saturday. Both Union County squads were victorious. And with a pep band and the Pit Crew out in full force, the visitors left with a loss, ringing in the ears, and some hurt feelings. Photo/Todd Forrest



Tyler Odom dribbles through traffic in The Pit. It's only fitting that the leading scorer that night was an Odom. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Lauren Zollinger (3) returned to the lineup last week. The reigning 8-AA Player of the Year scored 8 vs Andrews. Photo/Todd Forrest



The 15 players that played in The Pit and reached 1,000 career points were honored at halftime of the girls game. The nine that attended are (left to right): Randy White, Michael Adams, Greg Adams, Danny Hemphill, Janna Tallent (Hemphill), Chris Adams, Jack Lance Jr., Kenya Lance (Patton), and Mandy Bradley (Hunter). Not pictured are Danny Aaron, the late Ricky Brown, Jamesa Dobbs, Nikki Gurley, Andrea Neely, and Kris Lance (Gooch). Photo/Todd Forrest

wanting to play another game (in The Pit) but I had to tell them that it would probably be a once-a-year deal," Coach Jones said.

Meanwhile, the Lady Panthers (11-3, 1-0) were never challenged in a 63-13 rout of the Lady Wildcats. Union opened up a 38-8 halftime lead and went on to outscore Andrews 25-5 in the second half.

Senior Lauren Zollinger was in action for the second time in as many days, coming off the bench to score 8 points in the second frame, including a 2-for-3 performance from long distance.

Kaitlyn Day scored all of her game high 11 points in the first half, connecting three times from beyond the arc.

However it was a trey by Ariel Maurer at the 5:37 mark of the first that got Union on the board. Madison Rich followed with a corner trey and Day

knocked down another deep ball, giving Union a 9-4 lead.

Andrews made it 9-7 but Brooke Maddox got in on the three-ball party and connected from the wing. She later scored on a driving lay up before Rich nailed another trey. Maddox capped off the quarter with a free throw and the Lady Panthers led 18-7.

Union put the clamps on in the second quarter, and with Zollinger seeing action, the Lady Panthers absolutely dominated the second frame 20-1.

Day and Zollinger both contributed 8 points each on two treys while Lisa Nalasci and Maddox added a bucket.

Six different Lady Panthers scored in third quarter as Union stretched its lead to 50-11.

Layne Colwell and Rich each hit a trey, Maddox added two free throws and Nalasci scored a deuce.

Kim Coyne hit 1-of-2 from the line following an Andrews intentional foul, Laura Beth Rogers also had a 1-for-2 trip at the line.

In the fourth quarter, Holly Stroman and Coyne each nailed threes. Madison Lariscy connected twice from the field, and Anna Danek hit a baseline jumper.

Day added 4 steals and 4 rebounds to go along with her 11 points. Maddox finished with 3 steals, while Zollinger made her presence known, if only as a decoy. The senior guard dished out 5 assists, grabbed 3 boards, and 3 steals in limited minutes.

Rich finished with 9 points and a steal. Maurer blocked 2 shots, Coyne had 2 steals, and Ashley Fair blocked 2 shots and had 2 steals. Nalasci added 4 points and 4 boards.

On Wednesday, the Lady Panthers traveled to Murphy, NC where they held off a late

Lady Bulldog surge in a 50-42 victory.

Union jumped out to an early 19-7 lead but the home team continued to chip away and at the half, the Lady Panther lead was 27-19. Things got even closer in the second half with Murphy getting within five after three at 38-33.

On Friday, Union County made quick work of Oglethorpe County in Zollinger's return and the first Region contest of the season.

The Lady Panthers cruised to a 59-28 victory, led by Maddox's 21 points.

The junior guard finished with 5 assists and 3 steals.

Day tossed in 12 points, 2 steals, and a block. Nalasci hauled in 10 boards, with 2 steals, a block, and 3 points. Maurer blocked 6 shots and snared 7 boards. Zollinger finished with 4 points and 2 assists in her



Ralston Drake



Ariel Maurer

return. Holly Stroman, Coyne, Rich, Danek, Colwell, and Fair all reached the scoring column.

The Panthers had an easy go of things at Murphy but had their hands full with Oglethorpe County.

After racing to a 35-9 lead at the break, Union cruised to a 73-25 win over the Murphy Bulldogs, led by 18 from Odom and 9 points from Matthew Rich.

"They (Murphy) are a better team than the way they played against us," Jones said. "We just shot the ball well. We opened with a 13-2 run and Tyler (Odom) had 11 of (the points)."

On Friday, the Region schedule came knocking in the form of the Patriots. The Panthers gladly answered, only to slam the door in their faces with an 11-4 third quarter, leading to a 45-35 win. Once again, Odom led the way with 18 points as Union held a 14-8 lead after one.

Oglethorpe responded with a 15-8 second quarter to take a 23-22 advantage into the locker rooms, thanks to a buzzer beating trey before the half.

The Panthers regained control with a 11-2 run in the third quarter, led by Odom's 8 points in the frame. Entering the fourth, Union led 33-27.

Treys by Odom and Hamby and two free throws from Hughes allowed the Panthers to put away the Patriots in the final 8 minutes.

"We couldn't make a shot in the first half," Coach Jones said. "We had a small run in the third and were able to push the lead out to 10 in the fourth. We played pretty good defense. Anytime you hold a team to 35 points, that's pretty good. I knew that if we could ever get a cushion on them that we'd be okay."

Hamby finished with 7 points, Coyne had 6 points, and Hughes added 5 points. Senior Grant Schuette scored 4 points while Wasko and Thomas Danek had 2 points each.

On Tuesday, Union travels to Riversville Military Academy for a boys only contest at 6 p.m. in Gainesville. This will be the game that counts toward the Region standings. The game at Union on Feb. 4th will not.

Friday, both teams are in action as Union makes the long trip south to Social Circle. A pair of wins for the Panthers will keep them alive for one of the top four spots in 8-AA. A loss in either game will likely drop Union from a top four seeding entering the Region Tournament.

"Those are two must win games," Jones said. "We have to get those wins and be undefeated in the region when we go to Rabun County next Tuesday. Rabun will be a huge game for both the guys and the ladies."



The Union County High School cheerleaders perform during halftime. Along with a pep band and the Pit Crew, they all contributed to the electric atmosphere on Saturday night. Photo/Todd Forrest



After the Andrews win the Pit Crew storms the court for the first time since the Panthers - minus their leading scorer Branden Dykes - knocked off first place Rabun during 1999-2000 season. Photo/Todd Forrest