

Sports

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Panthers rout Riverside Military in Sub-Region 8-AA North opener

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Union County (15-2, 2-1) had all five starters score in double figures as the Panthers made quick work of Riverside Military Academy in a 74-43 victory on Tuesday night.

Union never trailed as they opened up a 21-9 first quarter lead that turned into a 35-17 lead at the half. A 13-4 fourth quarter run put the finishing touches on Union's first sub-region victory of the season.

Zach Odom led the Panthers with 21 points – 9 in the fourth quarter. James Rowe scored 16, Rhett McCombs had 14, while Dylan Coyne and C.J. Byers added 10 a piece.

An early trey from Rowe was followed by a steal and score from Coyne to give Union a 5-0 lead less than 42 seconds into the contest. Leading 14-7 with 1:58 left in the quarter, McCombs connected from long distance, Rowe hit two free throws and a bucket from Coyne with 11 seconds left gave Union its 21-9 advantage entering the second.

A 12-2 run to open the second quarter put the Panthers on top 33-12 at the 3-minute mark of the second quarter. The run was triggered by a driving lay up by Rowe, then consecutive treys from Odom put Union ahead 29-12. Rowe converted an Eagle turnover into a deuce and Odom swiped around a short jumper from an RMA pass and took it the other way for 2 more, capping the Panther run. The Eagles scored 5 straight before two McCombs free throws doubled up RMA at 35-17.

A quick Eagle 3-pointer made it 15-point game early in the third but Union answered with a 10-3 run thanks to two



One-on-three: Zach Odom scores and is fouled. Photo/Todd Forrest



McCombs with the acrobatic lay up. Photo/Todd Forrest

treys from Byers sandwiched around a short jumper from Rowe and lay in by Coyne. Byers' second trey of the quarter opened up a 22-point Panther lead at 45-23. RMA chipped away and managed to trim their deficit to 18 entering the fourth quarter at 51-33.

The Panthers quickly put the game on ice with more of



Rowe lays in two of his 16 points. Photo/Todd Forrest

the same – a balanced scoring attack with Odom leading the charge.

After being shutout in the third quarter, Odom drove the lane for two that led to 10 straight Panther points in the paint. Coyne scored on a lay up, Rowe knocked down a 10-footer, Odom drove for 2 more, then McCombs was



Dylan Coyne's lay up gave Union a 5-0 lead. Photo/Todd Forrest



Kyle Hamby hits a late 3-point-er. Photo/Todd Forrest

fouled on a lay up resulting in a 3-point play. Odom added two more free throws before nailing a trey, Byers dropped in 2 inside, and McCombs scored on a turnover – giving Union a 71-41 lead when the starters were pulled at the 2:05 mark. Kyle Hamby would hit a trey from the wing for Union's final points of the evening.



Tyler Odom during the Panther JV game. Photo/Todd Forrest

Odom added 3 steals to his 21-point performance and Rowe went for 16 points, 8 rebounds, and 6 assists. McCombs had 14 points, 5 assists, and 5 steals, Coyne added 10 points, 8 rebounds, and 4 steals. Byers chipped in 10 points and Hamby finished with 3.

For the first time this season, all Union starters reached



C.J. Byers with the jump hook. Photo/Todd Forrest

double digits and Union County Head Coach David Tucker believes that balanced scoring plus an increase in his team's assist totals will be the key to Union's success.

"Everybody is starting to gain confidence," Coach Tucker said. "C.J. (Byers) is playing better and that is drawing more defenders into the paint, we're passing the ball better, playing good defense, and I think we're going to continue to get better."

Earlier, the JV Panthers let one slip away as they fell 54-51 to Riverside in overtime. The game was tied at 11-11 after one but Union was able to take a slim lead at the half, 30-27. Union opened up a 39-32 lead late in the third but RMA was able to get within three entering the fourth. Trailing 46-44 with three seconds remaining, RMA missed the front end of a 1-and-1 that resulted in Lake Arnick breaking free down the right sideline where a full-court pass hit him in stride for a game-tying lay up at the buzzer. With Hunter Hughes fouled out of the game, Union eventually succumbed to the Eagles 54-51 when Tyler Odom's game-tying three bounced off the rim as time expired.

Tyler Odom led the way with 19 points while Arnick added 10.

Lady Panthers surge past Fannin

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Blue Ridge - Facing a 32-20 disadvantage in hostile territory, Coach David Tucker's charges didn't panic. In fact, they rose to the occasion with a 28-4 run to close the game for a 48-36 Union victory - the fifth straight over the Lady Rebels.

Pretty impressive since until 50 days prior, the Lady Panthers hadn't beaten Fannin four consecutive times in almost 30 years. Now with all of its non-region games out of the way, Union County (13-5, 2-1) can focus on Region 8-AA and setting themselves up for their fifth trip to state in six years. Union enters the heart of the Region schedule on a wave of momentum that continued Saturday in Blue Ridge.

The Lady Rebels would take an 11-7 lead after one quarter thanks to five free-throws that put Shawna Brown and Hannah Hughes into severe foul trouble early.

A jumper from Lauren Zollinger, who led the way with 20 points, was followed by a trey from Carly Adams and two from the line by Adams to tie the score at 14-14 with 1:53 to play in the half.

A Lady Rebel bucket was answered by two free throws from Zollinger. The two teams then exchanged 1-for-2 trips at the line before Fannin hit 2-of-2 at the 21-second to mark to take a 19-17 lead into the break.

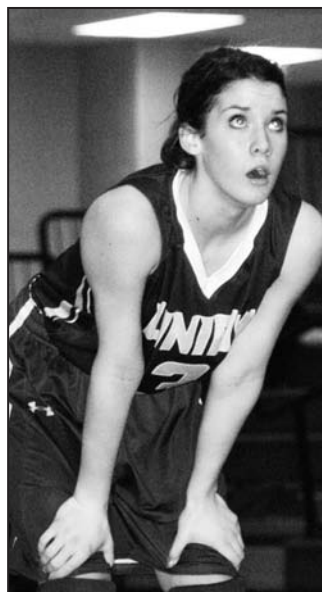
The Lady Rebels came out in the third quarter like a team on mission and leapt out to a 32-20 lead courtesy of a 13-3 run. A lay in from Zollinger put an end to the bleeding with 3:12 to go in the third.

That's when the Lady Panther defense put the clamps down.

Brooke Maddox drove inside for two, Zollinger converted a steal into a lay up, and Maddox followed suit - scoring off another Fannin turnover. Jeanelle Arnold took it strong to the basket for a deuce and when the quarter ended, Union only trailed 35-30 with momentum now on the side of the visitors.

One free-throw was all the Lady Rebels could muster in the final frame as Union stormed past Fannin County in the final 8 minutes.

A 15-footer from



Lauren Zollinger at the line.

Zollinger in the opening minute of the fourth made it a three-point game. Arnold would then nail back-to-back treys giving Union the lead for good at 38-35. Zollinger went into the paint for two before Fannin's leading scorer Hope Cochran fouled out with 1:58 to play.

The foul on Cochran led to a 1-for-2 trip at the line for Zollinger but Lisa Nalasci forced a jump ball on the miss - awarding the ball back to Union. On the ensuing in-bounds play, Zollinger knocked down a corner jumper.

Leading 43-35, with 1:22 to play, Arnold picked up her fifth foul - giving the Lady Rebel faithful something to cheer about. However, it would be the last thing they would get excited over.

Maddox hit a pair from the line and Adams went 3-for-4 at the line, all in the final 35 seconds, giving Union the win.

"Our discipline showed when we fell behind," Union Coach David Tucker said. "Jeanelle hit two big shots, Lauren handled the ball well, and Brooke made some plays, they all made plays. If you just keep believing and keep playing, good things will happen. Lauren and Carly made free throws. It was just a total team effort," he said.

Zollinger scored 20 with 3 assists and 3 steals. Carly Adams finished with 11 points, Arnold had 8 points, 6 rebounds, 4 steals, and 2 blocks, Maddox scored 6 points, 2 steals and dished 2 assists.

Hannah Hughes had a first quarter trey and Ariel Maurer grabbed five boards and blocked two shots.



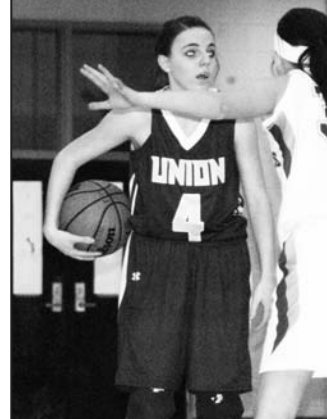
Jeanelle Arnold drives for two.



Brooke Maddox with a jumper.



Hannah Hughes with a trey.



Carly Adams at Fannin County Photos by Todd Forrest.

Panthers survive Rebel country

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Blue Ridge - Nothing comes easy on the road, especially when facing a rival looking to avenge a 28-point loss from November.

However, The Union County Panthers (17-2, 3-1) overcame a sluggish start to escape with a 46-38 win over rival Fannin County on Saturday.

With the game all tied at 33 entering the fourth, Rhett McCombs, James Rowe, Zach Odom and Dylan Coyne propelled the Panthers to an 8-2 run in the final 1:35 with Union clinging to a 38-36 lead.

With 1:11 to play, Odom leapt in front of a Fannin County pass, and as the senior was falling into the bleachers, he was able to bounce the ball off a Rebel player before going out of bounds, giving the ball back to the Panthers.

The steal by Odom set up two Panther free throws from Rowe - making it a 40-36 game with 1:03 to play.

The Rebels' go-to-guy, Will Patterson, quickly went inside for two, bringing Fannin back to within a bucket at 40-38 at the 45-second mark.

Fannin wouldn't score again.

Coyne, continuing to find his niche offensively, stepped to the line and sank two clutch free throws with 38 seconds to play.

Following a Fannin offensive board, McCombs pick-pocketed the Rebels and raced down the court for a lay up with 12 seconds left - putting the game away for good.

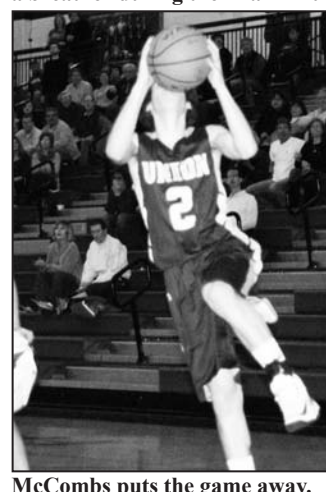
The Rebels missed a trey and a rebound and two free-throws by Rowe sent the Panthers back to Blairsville with 17 wins - matching the third highest win total since the 2004-2005 season.

Coming into the contest, the Rebels had a solid defensive game plan and weren't going to allow McCombs or Odom to beat them. In the last meeting, in which Union won 60-32, the backcourt duo combined for 45 points - 42 in the first three quarters.

"Anytime you play on the road it's going to be tough," Union Coach David Tucker said. "They made a couple of our other players make plays,



Thomas Danek, Dylan Coyne, Zach Odom, and Rhett McCombs get a breather during the final minutes at Fannin. Photo/Todd Forrest



McCombs puts the game away. Photo/Todd Forrest

they did and that will help us (later in the season). Our big boys still stepped up when it counted with rebounds and it was good team win.

Despite being shutout in the first half, McCombs still finished with a team high 13 points. Including a clutch 3-pointer to break a tie game with 4:58 to play.

"If you stay positive, good things will happen and we did," Tucker said. "We kept playing and kept coaching"

The Panthers as a team didn't score until nearly six minutes into the contest when Odom hit the first of his two treys. Rowe nailed a 22-footer for a 9-8 Panther lead but the Rebels raced down the court and dropped in two as the buzzer sounded for a 10-9 Fannin lead.

The Rebels opened the second with five-straight but four straight from Tyler Odom made it a 15-13 game. A bucket in the paint and a jumper from C.J. Byers tied it up at 17-17. A lay up by Coyne with 56 seconds left in the half gave Union a 19-17 advantage at the half.

The Panthers suffered from a bit of bad luck in the second half that allowed Fannin



James Rowe during the first half. Photo/Todd Forrest

to keep it close. First, while battling for a rebound, the Panthers accidentally tipped the ball into the wrong basket - giving the Rebels two points. Later a Zach Odom lay up was knocked out of the net in what should have been a goaltending call.

Fortunately, the Panthers were able to overcome thanks to seven third quarter points from McCombs, four from Zach Odom and three by Coyne.

McCombs finished with 13 points, 3 steals, and a block. Odom scored in double-figures for the 18th time in 19 games - going for 10 points and 4 assists. Rowe scored 8 points and grabbed 9 boards, while Coyne had 7 points, 7 rebounds, and 5 assists. Byers and Tyler Odom scored four each and Thomas Danek had a huge block late in the fourth quarter.

Union now turns its attention to a home meeting with Rabun on Tuesday and trip to Washington-Wilkes on Friday. Yet, Coach Tucker isn't putting any added emphasis on these games, knowing full well that his team will be prepared for the magnitude of the final six games.

"When your record is 17-2, every game is a big game," Tucker said.