

# Sports

See the Sports Section at nghanews.com

## Rabun rallies past Union; Lady Panthers hold off Wilkes, upset at Fannin

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
sports@nghanews.com

**Tiger** - Entering the week, the Lady Panthers cracked the Top 10 in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution's* State basketball poll.

Unfortunately the 10th ranked Lady Panthers bobbled away a golden opportunity to further impress the voters, and more importantly, let a precious Region 8-AA victory slip through their fingers last Wednesday night in a rescheduled contest behind enemy lines in Rabun County.

Adding insult to injury, Union County (13-5, 3-1) led the defending Region 8-AA champs for more than 27 minutes before fatigue and foul trouble took its toll and the Lady Cats, with luck on their side, caught fire from the field. The end result was a 28-10 run in the final 10 minutes to overtake the Lady Panthers 53-46.

"We caught a lot of bad breaks," Lady Panther Head Coach David Tucker said. "We missed some easy shots and a lot of shots that we normally don't miss."

Despite battling inconsistent officiating and an anti-purple home crowd, Union built a 14-point lead following a 9-0 run right out of the gates.

After being shutout for the first 4-plus minutes of the game, Rabun fired back with a 7-2 spurt, cutting the Lady Panther lead to 11-7. The next five points belonged to Union thanks to free throws from Brooke Maddox and Layne Colwell. A pull up jumper by Colwell with 10 seconds to play in the quarter put Union on top 16-7 entering the second.

Lauren Zollinger came off the bench on nailed a trey from the left wing to open up a 19-7 lead. Kaitlyn Day knocked down 1-of-2 at the line, and after a Rabun basket, Colwell drove the baseline for two more and Maddox, playing with 3 fouls, hit a pair at the stripe for a 24-10 Union advantage.

Seven unanswered by the Lady Cats were countered by free throws from Zollinger, Day and a lay in by Colwell to keep Rabun at bay with a 30-21 edge entering the break.

With more than 2 minutes passing in the second half without a score, Maddox got things going with a dribble drive for two, followed by a 1-for-2 visit to the stripe. At the 3:51 mark, Day, connected on a very deep trey from what seemed like the outskirts of Tallulah Falls. The junior's long distance connect-



Junior Kaitlyn Day connects on a trey at Rabun County.

tion at the 3:51 mark of the third turned out to be the final highlight of the night for the Lady Panthers who's woes were just around the corner.

With just over 2 minutes to play in the third, the game took a complete 180-degree turn. The Lady Cats began to find their groove and with each basket, the momentum began to swing. With each Union miss or turnover, the red and white crowd began to buzz. When the horn sounded at the end of the third, the Lady Panthers were able to regroup, but it would be on the heels of a 13-0 Rabun County run and Union was behind 38-36 entering the fourth - the Lady Panthers' first deficit of the game.

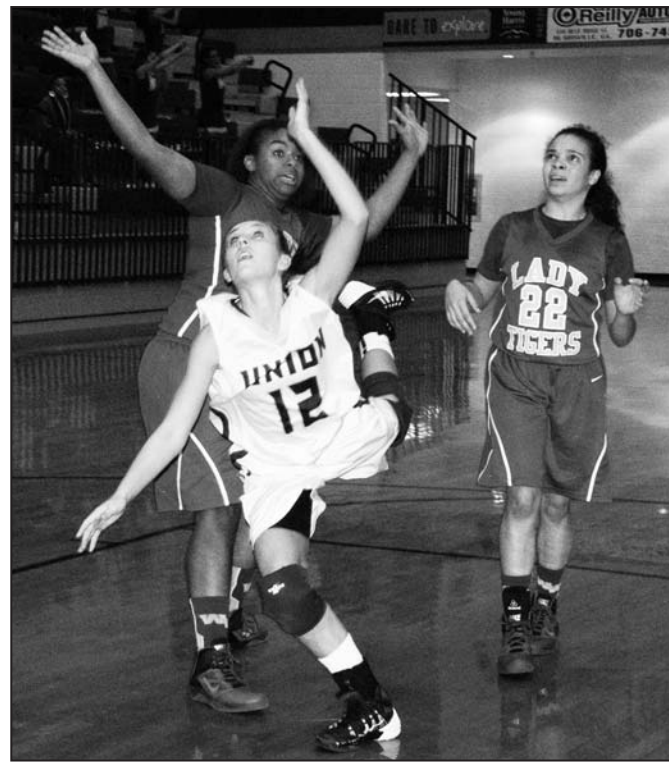
When trailing after three quarters, Union was 0-3 on the season and coupled with severe foul trouble things were looking grim for the Lady Panthers.

A quick Rabun bucket made it 40-36 but Madison Rich found net from downtown, Maddox got to the line where she knocked down 2-of-2 - putting Union back on top at 41-40 - showing Coach Tucker's charges' true grit, and proving they weren't going to succumb so easily.

"We were on the road and I was pleased with the effort so I'll take it. No complaints," Coach Tucker said.

Playing on pure adrenaline at that point, Maddox swiped the inbounds pass for a quick deuce and Union appeared to have seized back the momentum with a 43-40 lead with 6:35 remaining.

The Lady Cats however scored seven straight, Maddox picked up her fifth foul, and with Zollinger still a long way off from 100 percent, the offense



Junior Brooke Maddox with two of her 25 points in a must-win game with Washington-Wilkes. Photos/Todd Forrest

began to sputter and the defense seemed to fall a step behind.

"I know what Lauren has been through and we just have to ease her back in," Coach Tucker said.

Day continued to have the hot hand and struck back with another trey at the 4:40 mark, getting Union to within a point, 47-46. Unfortunately, the next six points belonged to Rabun and the Lady Panthers, who were red hot early, fell ice cold.

And with what must have been an angel on their shoulders, the opportunistic Lady Cats heated up at just the right moment.

Day and Maddox carried most of the load with 14 and 12 points respectively. Colwell continued to progress and could be a star in the making, finishing with 7 points and a perfect 3-for-3 at the line. Rich scored 5 points, and furthermore, continued to make clutch shots for the Lady Panthers, hitting a vital 3-pointer in the fourth right when Rabun was on the verge of putting Union County away for good. Zollinger scored 5 points, all coming in the second quarter. Meanwhile, junior Lisa Nalaschi, who leads the team in double-doubles, was limited to 2 points.

The loss is Union's first within 8-AA and deals a devastating blow to their No. 1 seed hopes. However, this could be a blessing in disguise for Coach Tucker's squad.

Last season, Union knocked off Rabun and was awarded the top spot and the bye but ended up third in the Region Tournament. With nearly a week



Sophomore Layne Colwell goes baseline for two at Fannin County. the postseason rolls around.

"Lauren is Lauren," a confident Coach Tucker said. "We all know what she's capable of and she'll be there. She'll be there when Region starts."

### Lady Panthers 60 Washington-Wilkes 51

There was no time to mourn the Rabun loss as two days later the Lady Panthers were tossed from the frying pan into the fire. Washington-Wilkes rolled into Blairsville with bad intentions and expectations of pulling off the upset.

And they almost did.

Union County held off the Lady Tigers' upset bid with a 60-51 win. The Lady Panthers were held in check beyond the arc, finishing 2-of-15 in that category. Despite losing their touch from 3-point land, Union remarkably still won by nine and held as much as a 12-point lead with 1:18 to play. It was a victory that can be chalked up to a 22-for-26 performance at the line and a career high 25 points from Maddox, 16 in the second half, she also hit 12 straight free throws before finally missing. The junior finished with a 15-for-16 night at the charity stripe, 6 steals, 3 assists - all team highs.

Nalaschi got back on track after an off-night in Rabun County, finishing with 13 points and 11 boards - eight coming on the offensive side - defensively she had 2 steals and blocked a shot.

"You can depend on her for a double double and knows what she's doing out there," Coach Tucker said. "But ya know, she's just like all the rest of our girls, she gives it her best every night."

Without question, Union needed to give it their best shot and when trailing 15-12 after one. And when trailing 30-29 at the break wasn't a wake up call,

a 36-30 hole, 3-minutes into the second half showed the Lady Panthers that this game was no cake walk. Washington-Wilkes would not roll over after the long trip into the mountains. Finally realizing that, Union brought out their A-game and outscored the Lady Tigers 30-12 over the next 11 minutes.

"We were turning the ball over and just caught standing around," Coach Tucker said. "We missed a lot of shots but to win after not playing well, that just proves that we're good."

With her team trailing by six, Zollinger showed signs of her old self when she nailed a pull-up jumper from the corner to spark an 11-2 run that covered 3 minutes.

Nalaschi followed Zollinger's deuce with a 2-for-2 trip to the line and Maddox got into the paint for two more, but the Lady Tigers responded and were back on top by five with 2:00 to play in the third. Yet again, Nalaschi responded, facing a man-to-man defense, and behind the arc, the junior blew past the defender for a lay up. Then Maddox was once again perfect at the line on consecutive trips, tying it up at 42-42. Nalaschi ended the quarter with a free throw and Union led 43-42 after three.

Maddox opened the fourth with a steal, drew a foul on her lay up attempt, and sank both of her freebies. Following a Wilkes basket, Nalaschi scored on consecutive possessions, Colwell knocked down a 15-footer, and Maddox drove for the bucket and a foul, after converting her and-1 play, Union led 54-46 with 4:42 to go. The visitors would never get within five as Maddox hit 5-of-6 at the line. Rich added one from the stripe to put the Lady Tigers away for good, staking claim to a 60-48 lead. Wilkes would convert an old fashioned 3-point play late to bring the final score back down to single digits.

Colwell's stock continued to rise as she improved on her 7-point game on Wednesday with 9 points against Wilkes, adding two steals and 9 boards to her box score. Zollinger finished with 7 points, 3 steals, and 2 assists.

"Lauren played a little bit better tonight," Coach Tucker said after the game. "Everybody is going have to take on a new role and learn a few more things, and we will. As long as we keep playing good defense, we have a chance."

Rich added 4 points and a steal, while Day was held to 2 points but got an assist and a steal. Ariel Maurer blocked 3. **See 8AA crunch time, Pg 13A**

## Rabun proves too much; injury strikes in loss to Wilkes but UC routs Rebels

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
sports@nghanews.com

The Panthers were able to keep pace with the high powered Rabun County Wildcats for the first 19-plus minutes, until the home team exploded for a 29-11 run to take a 77-57 lead with 4:45 to play, en route to a 80-62 Rabun win.

The Wildcats came out firing on all cylinders but so did the Panthers. It's that, or neither team felt like playing any defense. Whatever the case, one thing is for sure, both teams were filling it up in the first half. However that style of basketball played into Rabun's hands and eventually hurt the Panthers (12-7, 3-2) in the long run.

The contest was almost dead even for the first two quarters with both teams shooting lights out. Junior Tyler Odom continued his hot streak scoring 6 points in the first to keep Union within striking distance at 27-20 after one quarter.

Rabun managed to grab a nine-point lead on three occasions in the second quarter but could never get it to double-digits. Leads of 29-20 at the 7:46 mark, 31-22 at 6:38, 33-24 at 6:08, and 35-26 at 5:35 as the teams exchanged basket after basket like it was a video game.

The Panthers finally managed to string together a few stops here and there and crashed the offensive boards on a Rabun team a little to anxious to get out and run the break following a miss. The misjudgment of Union's much improved rebounding and post play, allowed the Panthers to get back into the game.

Junior Hunter Hughes got a lay up, Odom scored on a put back lay up, he followed that with a pull-up jumper. Senior Dylan Coyne hit from the baseline. Odom scored another offensive board for two, and junior guard Lake Amick crashed the boards and tied it up at 38-38 on another put-back with 2:45 left in the half.

Rabun went 1-of-2 at the line on the ensuing possession and the Panthers had a chance for their



Hunter Hughes hits one of his 11 fourth quarter free throws at Fannin. first lead since it was 5-3 just 90 seconds in.

Odom went to the line where he also went 1-of-2, tying it back up at 39-39 with 1:35 to go.

An old fashioned 3-point play gave the Wildcats a 42-39 advantage but two free throws by junior Matthew Wasko got Union within a point at 42-41 going into the locker rooms.

Rabun opened the second half with a trey but Drake and Wasko kept the Panthers within one. Odom went back to the line for another 1-for-2 trip - keeping Union within two at 48-46 with 4:46 to play. A Coyne basket kept the Panthers within three but the Wildcats blew things open from there.

Rabun went on an 15-2 run in the final 3-plus minutes of the third quarter and led 66-50 entering the fourth.

Odom cut the lead to 13 with a basket and-1 but an 11-4 Wildcat run followed to give Rabun a 77-57 lead at the 4:45 mark. Baskets by Odom and Coyne prevented the lead from growing any further with the final score ending up 80-62.

Odom led the way for the

seventh consecutive game with 21 points, Coyne had 15, Kyle Hamby and Drake had 6 points each, Hughes added 5 points.

Wasko scored 4 points while Danek and Schuette had 2 each.

### Panthers 60 Washington-Wilkes 69

The Panthers were locked in the most competitive game of the season last Friday night in Blairsville.

Early on the Panther guard duo of Hamby and Hughes couldn't be contained and the twosome combined for eight points in the paint.

After a quarter, Union held an 11-8 lead that they managed to stretch to 19-10 with 4:40 before the half.

Coyne and Odom supplied the firepower for Union's 8-2 run but Wilkes roared backed with an 11-2 run to tie things up at 21-21. Odom knocked down a corner trey and Coyne scored on a put back with 3 seconds to play, giving the Panthers a 26-21 lead at the break.

Unfortunately, the Panthers lost Drake early in the second quarter



Ralston Drake at Rabun County prior to his injury. Photos/Todd Forrest to what appeared to be a severe ankle sprain. Before the game, Union lost another big man in Schuette when he accidentally smacked his head on the locker room door just moments before warm ups.

"It's not looking good (for Ralston), we don't think it's broke but it's a high ankle sprain," Panthers Coach Casey Jones said.

With the responsibility of controlling the paint falling on Danek, who later got into foul trouble, it forced sophomores Logan Baker and Chase Shook into the mix. Union was also without senior guard Elijah Ryals who missed all three games last week.

It was already a physical contest early in the third when the Tigers took advantage of the shorthanded Panthers and took its first lead since the 5:46 mark of the first quarter. They would stretch their lead to 41-36 with 2:33 to play in the third but the Panthers held a 9-3 spurt in the final 2:28 to hold a slim 45-44 edge entering the fourth.

Twenty seconds into the fourth, Wilkes regained the lead and never relinquished it. Trailing 51-46 with 5:25 to play, Hughes hit

two from the line and Odom scored off the dribble to make it a one-possession game again. Following a Tiger basket, Hughes went 1-for-2 at the line, making it a 54-51 game with 3:00 left.

The Panthers were whistled for an intentional foul with 2:09 left and Wilkes was able to open up a 61-51 advantage with just 1:45 to go.

Coyne, Hughes, and Odom traded baskets against Tiger free throws the rest of the way and the Panthers fell by nine.

Hughes had 18 points, 3 assists, and 3 steals, and Coyne had a career-high 18 points and 11 boards. Odom's streak of leading scorer ended at seven games but the junior still posted a solid 15-point, 2-assist and one steal performance. Hamby added 7 points, and Drake had 4 points and a blocked shot before exiting early.

### Panthers 57 Fannin County 39

**Blue Ridge** - The following day, the Panthers got Schuette back but not Drake.

Schuette certainly made up

for his absence the night before. The senior post scored a career-high 10 points with eight coming in the second quarter as Union put some distance between themselves and the Rebels.

"Grant (Schuette) had a big game for us tonight," Coach Jones said. "He had a little injury last night before the game but he came in tonight and was big for us."

Hughes poured in a career-high 24 points, going 12-for-14 at the line, 11-of-12 in the fourth quarter alone, leading the Panthers to a 57-39 win. More impressively, the junior guard also accounted for more than 10 charges taken over the weekend.

"I wish we would have been keeping up with his charges but I do know he's had a bunch," Coach Jones said. "That was something we talked about at the beginning of the season and that we want to pride ourselves on. Hunter is really good at it and he's tough. You've gotta be tough to take a charge."

Leading 28-19 at the break, Hamby hit two at the line to open an 11-point lead. Fannin battled back to within six but Hughes, Coyne, and Hamby stretched the Panther lead to 40-26 with 1:19 to play in the third. Once again, the Rebels responded with consecutive buckets to make it a 10-point game entering the fourth.

A quick Fannin trey made it a 7-point game but Hamby hit a free throw and Hughes hit six straight. Amick connected on 5-of-6, giving Union a 50-37 lead with 2:50 to play. Hughes hit 5-of-6 the rest of the way and the Panthers pulled away a 7-0 to end the game.

"We got several guys who can handle the ball and hit free throws for us when you've got a lead and trying to stall a little bit," Coach Jones said.

Hamby finished with 9 points, Amick had 7, Odom had 3, while Coyne and Andrew Brown had 2 each.

Union hosts Jefferson on Tuesday, Rabun County on Friday, and Murphy, NC on Saturday for Senior Night.