

# Sports

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## Panthers put Rabun County away early with 20-2 first half run

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The senior duo of Pierson Allison and Sawyer Drake combined for 43 points in a 63-48 victory over Rabun County to improve to 7-7 overall and 2-2 in 8-AA heading into Tuesday's showdown at region favorite Banks County.

After falling in the Battle of the States title game the week before, Union head coach Corey Garrett challenged his team's toughness.

"Over the last week we've focused on effort and toughness in practice," he said. "Even after tonight's win, I'm still not sure we're where we need to be. It feels like we're leaving something on the table after every game. We just need to keep getting after it in practice and amp up the intensity."

With last Saturday's trip to Putnam County postponed due to the threat of winter weather, Rabun County was all that stood between Union County and a perfect week to begin 2020. And with the opportunity to extend a winning streak over a region rival to a half-dozen games, the Panthers seized control late in the first quarter, holding the Wildcats scoreless for almost six minutes. The defensive clamp-down resulted in a 13-0 run that allowed Union to open up a double-digit lead they would never relinquish.

After falling behind 8-3, Rabun stormed ahead 11-10 with 1:09 to play in the opening period. They wouldn't score again until the 2:28 mark of the second.

The Panthers would go on to outscore the Wildcats 15-2 in the second quarter, capping off a 20-2 run that spanned the final 8:53 of the first half, giving Union a 30-13 advantage at the break.

The 20-2 onslaught be-



Senior guard Pierson Allison scored 12 of his 22 points in the first half to help Union build a 30-13 lead at the break. Photo/Todd Forrest

gan with a Landon Cox triple that put the Panthers back in front at 13-11. Later in the first frame, Allison would convert a Rabun turnover into a bucket on the other end for a 15-11 lead after one.

The first four points of the second belonged to Drake, coming on two free throws and a floater in the lane. Allison followed suit with four-straight via a trey from the top of the key and a 1-for-2 trip to the line.

Leading 23-11, Union allowed its only points of the period before closing with seven-straight to build a 30-13 lead. The 7-0 spurt was sparked on the defensive end as Drake turned two steals into layups, Kaston Hemphill split a pair at the charity stripe and Allison beat the buzzer with a dribble-drive in the final seconds.

The Panthers built its largest lead of the night at 34-13 with a short jumper from Drake and a layup by Allison off a Wildcats' turnover. The teams would trade baskets until the midway point of the third with Union maintaining a comfortable 42-21 advantage.

Leading 44-24 with under two minutes left in the period, the Panthers surrendered consecutive buckets as Rabun was able to stop the bleeding by outscoring Union 8-4 over the final 1:59, taking a manageable 48-32 deficit into the final frame.

A Wildcats' trey on the opening possession of the fourth made it a 48-35 game -- the closest margin since it was 25-13 -- but Drake answered with a three of his own to keep Rabun at bay.

Union appeared to have



Senior Sawyer Drake scored 21 points in Union County's win over Rabun County on Friday. Photo/Todd Forrest

things under control with a 59-43 advantage at the 3:42 mark, but the Wildcats scored five-unanswered, trimming the difference to 11 at 59-48 with 2:32 remaining.

That proved to be the wake-up call the Panthers needed as they clamped down defensively and shutout Rabun the rest of the way to secure the 15-point victory.

Still, coach Garrett wasn't pleased with his team's second-half effort. After limiting the Wildcats to 13 first-half points on 18% shooting, Union surrendered 35 points on 48% from the floor in the second half - marking the third-straight game the Panthers have allowed 33 or more in the second half after holding its previous three opponents to 22 points or less after the intermission.

"Even up 30-13 at half-

time, we weren't happy so we came out of the 1-3-1 (defense) and went man-to-man, but it felt like something was missing out there," Garrett said. "We just need to keep working because we haven't been able to put a complete game together."

**Individual Stats** - Allison finished with 22 points, four rebounds and a pair of steals. Drake turned in a double-double with 21 points, 12 rebounds and a pair of steals.

Hemphill ended up with 6 points and two boards; Morlock had 5 points, six rebounds and a game-high three steals.

Cox had 3 points, an assist and a steal but left the game in the first half with a lower extremity (ankle/foot) injury. Landon Kight finished with three; Bryson Larissey and Logan Helcher added 2 points apiece.

Clayton Dixon led Rabun with 13 points and three boards; Connor McKay added 12 points and five rebounds.

**Team Stats** - Union shot 44% (20-for-46) from the floor and 33% (4-for-12) from 3-point territory. In the first half, the Panthers hit on 47% (9-for-19) of their shots but made only 41% (11-for-27) after halftime. The Wildcats finished 4-of-15 (27%) from downtown but hit 44% of their second-half attempts.

Union hit 13-of-19 (68%) at the line; Rabun was 1-for-2 (50%). The Panthers won the rebound battle 35-30 overall and 12-11 on the offensive glass. The Wildcats held a slight edge in points in the paint at 30-28, but turned it over 15 times to Union County's dozen.

**Up next** - Union County will visit Banks County, who is currently 13-2 overall and 4-0 in Region 8-AA. After starting 8-0 and climbing as high as No. 3 in Class AA, the Leopards suffered blowout losses to Lumpkin County and Buford.

However, Banks County already owns a 65-35 victory at Rabun County and an 86-68 win over a Monticello squad that defeated Union.

"They will be tough, they have shooters everywhere, they have a big guy in the middle and (Carl) Cleveland is going to present a matchup problem, but we are still capable of beating them," Garrett said.

On Friday, the Panthers will host 3-13 Oglethorpe County, who lost 78-68 to Elbert County and is 0-5 in region play.

The following day, Union will have a chance for revenge when they host Fannin County in a makeup game. All three girls games are scheduled to tip at 6 p.m.

## No. 3 Rabun County survives upset bid from Hunter's Lady Panthers

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The Lady Panthers overcame a shaky start to give third-ranked Rabun County all they could handle in a 50-46 loss on Friday night.

Sophomore Ava Hunter returned in a monster performance, leading Union County with 17 points, 11 rebounds, a career-high seven blocked shots and three assists.

Tied 20-20 at the break, Union scored the first six points of the third quarter, then held a 41-40 lead with 3:21 to play. But in the end, it was the battle-tested Lady Cats surviving what could potentially be a preview of next month's Region 8-AA title game.

"This was the best our girls have played all season," Union head coach Crystal Beach said after the game. "Coach (Mandy) Hunter has been around these girls for a long time and she believes this is the best she's ever seen them play, and I believe that."

"We competed for four quarters and did everything we could have done, sometimes the ball just doesn't bounce your way."

Rabun County was paced by a balanced scoring attack spearheaded by nine points from senior Laken Stiles. Fellow seniors Destiny Deetz and Hannah Cannon each chipped in eight points in the win.

Trailing 38-32 with 5:42 to play, Union County refused to wilt under the Lady Cats' relentless pressure defense, tying the score at 38-38 on a basket by freshman Ellie Cook and two free throws each from Hunter and sophomore Riley Allison.

Trailing 40-39 with 3:21 remaining, sophomore Rebekah Chambers scored in the post to put the Lady Panthers in front 41-40. Rabun would even the score with a free throw, then regain the lead at 43-41 with a basket on its next possession.

Senior Kait McCarter split a pair at the line to move Union within a point at the 2:26 mark. A minute later, Hunter answered the Lady Cats with a short jumper to trim the deficit to 45-44 with 1:28 left.

Rabun would win two free throws with 41 seconds left to stretch its lead back to three at



Sophomore Ava Hunter goes up for two of her game-high 17 points vs Rabun County. Photo/Todd Forrest

47-44, but McCarter kept the pressure on by scoring down low on the ensuing Lady Panther possession.

After Rabun hit 1-of-2 at the charity stripe for a 48-46 edge with 12 seconds left, Union was unable to convert as the Lady Cats secured the rebound and put the game away with a pair of free throws.

The Lady Panthers could have rolled over on multiple occasions but they refused to quit. On the game's opening possession, Union County was forced to burn a timeout when Rabun's defense trapped a Lady Panther just 14 seconds in.

Union would go four minutes without a field goal, falling behind 6-1 before cutting the deficit to 10-7 after a quarter. The first two baskets of the second went to the Lady Cats as they opened up their largest leads of the game at 14-7 and 16-9.

Union County would close the half by outscoring Rabun 11-4 over the final 5-plus minutes to force a 20-20 tie at the break. The Lady Panther rally was sparked by senior Andelin Hill, who scored six of her eight points in the second frame.

Trailing 16-9, Hill scored six-unanswered to pull Union within one at 16-15. Still down 20-16 following a Brooke Dockrey free throw, McCarter closed the half with back-to-back buckets in the final 61 seconds to even the score at 20-20.

"Early on, we weren't moving the ball as much as I'd like to have seen, but we made an adjustment and that's what helped us go on the run to tie things up at 20-20," Beach said. "Our kids were really great at making the adjustments and executing when we needed to."

Hill opened the third with a layup off a Rabun turnover for Union's first lead of the game.

They would extend the margin to 26-20 with two free throws from Dockrey and a Hunter putback.

As great teams always do, the Lady Cats countered with seven-unanswered before Hunter pushed Union County back in front 28-27. Rabun County quickly regained the lead with five-straight points to cap a 12-2 run that put the Lady Panthers in a 32-28 hole. A basket by Chambers was able to limit the damage as Union entered the fourth down 33-30.

Things could have easily spiraled out of control when Hill went to the bench with four fouls and her team trailing 35-32. Moments later, Rabun split a pair of free throws then forced a turnover that resulted in a layup and a 38-32 advantage.

Instead of rolling over, the Lady Panthers returned the favor by rattling off six-straight, knotting the score at 38-38 with



Andelin Hill led the Union comeback, turning a 16-9 second-quarter deficit into a 26-20 third-quarter lead via a 17-4 run. Photo/Todd Forrest

4:23 to play.

"It was two great teams competing tonight and we gave them a run for their money," Beach said. "I have no doubt when we go down there it will be another great game."

**Stats** - Hill finished with 8 points, four rebounds, three assists, two blocks and a steal. McCarter added 7 points, 11 boards and a block.

Allison, Chambers and Dockrey chipped in 4 points apiece with Dockrey pulling down five boards, dishing out four dimes and recording three steals.

Cook finished with 2 points, six rebounds, an assist, a steal and a block; junior Kyla Locklear added two rebounds.

Union County shot just 33% from the floor while going 0-for-8 from behind the arc and 14-for-23 (61%) at the foul line.

Rabun County shot 68%

at the line (13-for-19) and connected three times from long distance.

**Up next** - The Lady Panthers will visit a streaky Banks County squad on Tuesday. The Lady Leopards are currently 7-9 overall and 3-2 in region play.

Despite a head-scratching home loss to Elbert County, Banks owns victories over a ranked Putnam County squad and a 71-31 rout of Monticello, who Union beat by 17. The Lady Leopards also lost 63-41 to Rabun County and defeated a 2-10 Oglethorpe County team, 85-32.

On Friday, the Lady Panthers will host the aforementioned Oglethorpe County. On Saturday, Union will welcome Fannin County -- who handed the Lady Panthers their first loss -- for a makeup game.

All three games are scheduled for a 6 p.m. tip-off.