

Sports

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Lady Panthers win fourth straight, host No. 3 Rabun on Tuesday

Union County erases early deficit with 33-12 outburst during win over Commerce

By Todd Forrest
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The Lady Panthers took care of business on Saturday afternoon, sinking Commerce 50-38 in a tune-up contest ahead of Tuesday's Region 8-AA opener vs. No. 3 Rabun County.

However, Saturday's victory wasn't as close as the 12-point difference on the scoreboard indicated. Union County jumped out to a 35-21 halftime advantage and didn't look back, scoring the first six points of the third to build a 41-21 lead.

The Lady Panthers extended their margin to 50-27 with 5:35 to play before shifting into cruise control down the stretch. Sophomore Sofia McNabb led Union with 13 points, while freshman Ariel McCarter had 11 points and a steal. Sophomore Lara Turner finished with 8 points and a career-high seven steals. Senior Rebekah Chambers also chipped in 8 points and five rebounds.

Senior Ava Hunter added 7 points, 10 rebounds and three blocks as the Lady Panthers improved to 10-5 on the year.

"I think we've shook off the rust [from the holidays] and now we're ready to get into region play," Union County head coach Mandy Hunter said. "We have to keep playing as a team [and] keep on being great teammates because it's going to take all 22 of us giving our all, day in and day out."

McCarter put Union on the board first, but Commerce scored on four straight possessions to take a 9-2 lead just over three minutes into the contest. The Lady Panthers answered with an 11-2 run, triggered by a McNabb 3-pointer, to build a 13-11 advantage with under two minutes left in the frame. Chambers finished off the quarter with a baseline jumper to extend the margin to 15-12.

Union County blew things open with a 20-9 second period behind 7 points in the quarter from Ava Hunter. McNabb scored four in the frame and Hill added



Ava Hunter with a chase-down block during the second quarter of her weekend victory over Commerce. Photo/Todd Forrest

three to mount a 35-21 halftime lead.

A McNabb layup and a 3-point play by Hill sparked an 11-0 run, allowing the Lady Panthers to grab a 26-12 advantage at the 5:45 mark of the half. Up 26-15, Ava Hunter scored on a putback, and Chambers answered a Commerce bucket with another offensive rebound for two.

But with the Tigers still hanging around, Ava Hunter closed the half by completing an and-one to award Union County a 35-21 edge at the intermission.

Like the second quarter, the Lady Panthers clocked the Tigers on the jaw during the opening minutes, using a 6-0 spurt to build a 41-21 lead. Still out front by 20 with 2:30 left in the period, Commerce scored consecutive buckets before a McNabb field goal pushed the margin to 43-25 at quarter's end.

The Tigers scored inside to start the fourth, but the next seven points went to Union County, putting the contest out of reach at 50-27 with 5:35 remaining. The run got underway via a Turner putback, followed by a McCarter

tretry and another offensive board from Turner.

That would be the Lady Panthers' final basket of the day, but Commerce wouldn't get within 20 until the 3:26 mark. The Lady Tigers cut the deficit to 50-36 as the clock approached two minutes while the Union County reserves finished the contest.

Hill's day ended with a game-high four assists, 3 points and two blocks. Katie Byers, Ansley Collins, Kamryn Mull and Morgan Warren pulled down one rebound apiece.

The Lady Panthers shot 41% from the floor while holding Commerce to 27% shooting. Union County hit 4 of 6 at the line; the Tigers went 4 for 7.

Neither squad was effective from deep, with Union making 2 of 10 and Commerce going 4 for 21.

The boards were nearly even with the Panthers holding a 35-34 edge while outscoring Commerce 34-22 in the paint. The Tigers turned it over 20 times to Union's 19 giveaways.

Union County hosts Rabun County (12-3) at 6 p.m. Tuesday



Junior guard Corinne Hill secures a loose ball under the basket in Saturday's Commerce win. Photo/Todd Forrest

in a series that hasn't been kind to the Purple and Gold for much of the past two decades. Since 2009, the Lady Panthers own just three wins over Rabun County, the last one coming in Blairsville on Jan. 30, 2015 - a 63-52 victory that saw Union rally from a 46-33 second-half deficit.

Lisa Nalaschi finished with 24 points and 10 boards in the win. Kaitlyn Day had 14 and Brooke Maddox added 11 under former coach David Tucker.

Prior to that 2015 win, Tucker's Lady Panthers defeated Rabun in January 2013 -- a 41-40 home victory where Jeanelle Arnold hit two free throws with 3.5 seconds left to give Union its only lead of the night when it mattered most.

Lauren Zollinger led the way with 13 points, four steals and three assists. Maddox scored 8 points and Carly Adams had 7 points and seven rebounds.

In 2009, the Candace Williams-led Lady Panthers upset Rabun County in Tiger during the Region 8-AA semifinals under interim coach Jim Hughes. Third-seeded Union County, playing

in memory of coach Mike West, went on to win the program's first region title in 15 years and advanced to the Sweet 16.

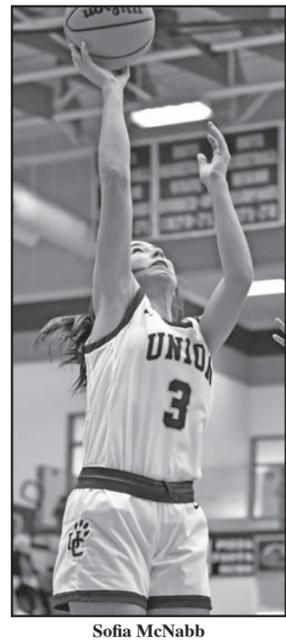
Williams scored 29 in the win over Rabun and 25 during the 8-AA title game vs. Fannin. Holli Abernathy added 18 in the 57-45 win over the Lady Rebels.

This Friday, Union County visits Banks County (8-9), who spent some time in the Class AA top-10 following a 5-2 start. A day later, Union hosts top-ranked Elbert County (16-2) for Senior Night.

According to Coach Hunter, focusing on the basics will be the key to Union's success during this critical three-game region stretch where the Lady Panthers host two of the top-three teams in Class AA.

"If we just focus on our defense, rebounding and we play hard the rest will take care of itself," she said.

"Rabun always has a great [full court pressure defense] so we have to make sure we stay patient against their press and not try and do too much," Coach Hunter added, shining a spotlight



Sofia McNabb

on Tuesday's contest.

As for common opponents, Cherokee Bluff lost 72-71 to Rabun County and 46-38 to Banks County. Rabun County lost 44-40 to Habersham and owns two routs over Stephens County. The Lady Cats defeated Commerce 59-43.

Banks County lost 46-44 at Habersham Central and split with Commerce - defeating the Tigers 58-23 on the road then losing 35-33 in Homer. The Leopards also own a 70-41 win over Towns County.

The Lady Panthers twice defeated Bluff by a 13-point average margin of victory. They split with Habersham, dismantled Stephens 70-46 and swept Towns by an average margin of 32 points.

Friday's meeting with Banks County will tip at 7 p.m. Saturday's Elbert County matchup will get underway at 5 p.m. The Senior Night festivities will take place between the varsity games.

Meanwhile, Elbert County's 48-16 win over Stephens County marks the only common opponent between Union County and the No. 1 Blue Devils.

Logan Helcher voted First Team All-Region; Coach Perry reflects on 2021

By Todd Forrest
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Union County senior quarterback Logan Helcher headlined the Panthers' six All-Region 8-AA selections from the 2021 season.

Helcher's nod marked Union County's only first-team selection on the 2021 all-region team. Four Panthers picked up honorable mention recognition on defense: Elijah Helton, Noah Helton, Eli Peugh and Trace Wright.

Senior kicker/punter Kyler Robbins rounded out Union's six selections, earning a special teams' honorable mention.

Helcher's importance to the Union County offense in 2021 can't be overstated. Despite early inconsistency at the running back position, Helcher picked up the slack and led the Panthers with 543 yards rushing and nine touchdowns.

Through the air, the senior completed 64% of his throws for 2012 yards and 22 touchdowns to only eight interceptions.

Recently, the North Georgia News spoke with Union head coach Michael Perry about his first season in Blairsville. The Gainesville graduate discussed his favorite memories from



Head coach Michael Perry addresses his team following Union County's first win of 2021 - a 48-14 victory at Riverside. Photo/Todd Forrest

2021, his regrets, the future of the program and more.

NGN: What was your most important takeaway from 2021?

MP: My biggest takeaway was how special that senior class was. It wasn't a large group, but I wouldn't trade them for anything. The resiliency they showed through all the ups and downs made them a pleasure to coach.

I'm really proud of those seniors and will really miss those guys. But at the same time, I'm looking forward to seeing which younger guys step up. Caiden Tanner has a great shot at being the quarterback and Cayleb Rogers and Connor Schuknecht are really talented running backs.

I'm also really proud of how our defense played, but we have some big shoes to fill in the secondary. That and the

offensive line are two key areas going into next year.

NGN: Was there a signature moment with that senior class that stands out?

MP: Definitely the Gilmer game. We were down so big, so late but they never stopped believing. There were some individual plays that I'll never forget. Especially Logan Helcher in the fourth quarter and overtime, they just could not tackle him.

NGN: On the flip-side, is there any regrets or anything you wish you'd done differently?

MP: Yeah, that Chestatee game was a tough loss. We were down a lot in that game too, but we came back and had a chance to tie it at the end. There were some moments in that game that were tough to swallow.

NGN: What are your off-season plans? Has anything been decided about spring football?

MP: Yes, we will have spring ball and I'll have all my coaches available, which will make a huge difference over last year. We haven't set a date yet, but we're looking at late-April or early-May.

NGN: What's your take on the new region alignment? If everything is finalized, that means no more Rabun and Elbert.

MP: It's definitely going to be interesting with three public and three private schools.

NGN: Fellowship Christian was a final four team in Class A. How good are they and do you think they're on Rabun's level?

MP: Definitely. They are very good. Their coach used to be at Blessed Trinity and of course, they have resources that we don't and can bring in players that we can't.

I'm pretty sure they could match Rabun across the board: at the skill positions and in the trenches. They consistently send guys on to play college football, so yeah, they're going to be really good.

I also think Athens Academy is going to be pretty good. Providence still has some ground to make up to catch [Athens Academy and Fellowship] as far as the three private schools go.

Hughes and Kight combine for 41 as Panthers fend off Commerce in OT

Region 8-AA action tips off Tuesday night with No. 9 Rabun County

By Todd Forrest
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Union County returned from an extended Christmas break with a 73-65 overtime victory vs. Commerce, erasing a 12-point first-half deficit and outscoring the Tigers 11-3 in the extra session to improve to 6-8 overall entering Region 8-AA competition.

"We didn't talk about being rusty [before the game], but obviously it's in the back of your mind after an 18-day layoff," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "But you could tell we were rusty, you could see it in the first quarter. I don't know how many easy shots and layups that we missed, but yeah, we just looked a bit awkward today."

Senior Landon Kight scored 18 points off the bench during his first game action since Nov. 17. The all-region performer scored six points in OT after drilling a game-tying 3 with just over a minute remaining in regulation.

Fellow 12th grader Lake Hughes led all scorers with 23 points and six treys; junior Eli Underwood added 11 points -- nine coming in the second frame to erase a 23-11 deficit.

An Underwood deuce and a Hughes triple helped mount a 38-32 third-quarter advantage, but the Tigers (5-8) outscored Union 14-7 over the final five minutes of the period to take a 46-44 lead into the fourth. Commerce junior Cayden Lord, who finished with 17 points on five 3-pointers, did most of the heavy lifting for his squad in the third, hitting three treys during a two-minute, 40-second span.

The Tigers stretched their lead to 51-48 at the six-minute mark of the fourth, but consecutive 3's from Hughes put Union back in front 54-53 just over a minute later.

Kight scored in the post to make it a 56-53 game, then senior Austin Taylor answered a Commerce trey with a 3-ball from the corner with 2:27 to play. The Tigers answered right back with a drive to the hoop that sparked a 6-0 spurt and put Union in a 62-59 hole as the clock approached 1:15.

On the ensuing Panthers' possession following a Commerce bucket, Kight trailed Houston Henry as the freshman point guard advanced up the floor and immediately found an



Senior Landon Kight matched a career-high with 18 points in his return from injury. Photo/Todd Forrest

open lane to his left. The Tigers quickly shut down the dribble drive, but Henry slammed on the brakes and kicked it out to Kight for the equalizer from the top of the circle.

Out of a timeout, Commerce misfired from 3-point range but pulled down the offensive board and hit reset with 34 seconds left. The Tigers were eventually whistled for a traveling violation while trying to spin past a defender at the elbow after they were unable to find an open shot on the perimeter.

Union regained possession with 19.7 seconds left but couldn't get off a decent look as Kight's spinning, fall-away jumper bounced off the back iron.

Kight scored down low to begin the overtime period off a Henry assist. Moments later, Henry knocked down a 3 from the wing when Kight kicked an entry pass back out to Taylor, who immediately swung the ball to Henry for a trey.

Ahead 67-62 inside of three minutes, Union forced a turnover when John swiped a dribble-drive at the elbow, and Kight cleaned up a Taylor miss on the other end with a putback at the 2:13 mark.

Commerce's lone overtime field goal came via a trey with 44 seconds left, but Taylor sank two free throws to push the margin back to six at 71-65, and Kight added an exclamation point with a layup in the final seconds.

"We were able to settle down and get some late stops

and get the win," Garrett said. "We'll take it."

The Panthers opened the contest with seniors Caleb John and Hayden Payne on the bench while Underwood and senior Daniel Snow moved into the starting five.

"Over the past couple weeks of practice, we've been looking for a new wrinkle, that new tool in the toolbox," Garrett said about the different lineups employed on Saturday. "We came in planning to play a few more guys, we didn't know how much, but we wanted to get a few more guys out there."

Snow got on the board in the early going, following up a Hughes basket that granted Union County a 4-2 lead, but that would be the Panthers' final lead of the quarter as Commerce rattled off seven unanswered points.

Payne moved the home team to within a basket at 12-10, but the Tigers closed the first frame up 16-11 and began the second with another 7-0 run.

Down 23-11, Underwood scored seven-in-a-row, beginning with a 3-point play at the 5:44 mark. Union inched within a point at 23-22 when Henry split two free throws and Hughes connected on his first triple of the game, but Commerce answered with five straight to extend the difference to 28-22.

Underwood scored again in the paint, and Hughes drilled consecutive treys -- the first a 25-footer from in front of the visitors' bench -- to put the Panthers back in front 30-28 with 30



Junior Eli Underwood pulls down one of his game-high eight rebounds vs. Commerce. Photo/Todd Forrest

seconds left in the first half.

Commerce missed a pair of free throws then chased down the offensive rebound in the corner with less than 10 seconds on the clock. But the Panthers applied a quick trap allowing John to pick off an errant pass and race the other way where his double-clutch layup was too strong, but Payne managed to beat the buzzer with a tip-in off the miss.

The Commerce coach received a technical foul while walking off the floor at halftime for claiming that John stepped out of bounds while tight-roping the sideline on the previous play.

Hughes began the third by splitting two technical free throws and spotting the Panthers a 33-28 lead.

Hughes finished with four rebounds and a steal along with his game-high 23 points on 6-of-12 shooting from downtown. Kight pulled down five boards, dished out two assists and came up with a steal during his 18-point return. Underwood grabbed a game-high eight rebounds and added one assist while scoring 11 points.

Henry finished with a game-high (also a career-high) eight assists and three steals to go with 4 points.

Furthermore, the freshman's toughness was on display when Henry returned from a hard fall that left him lying on the floor for several moments during the latter stages of the fourth quarter.

Taylor finished with 5

points and three assists; freshman Jude Ellis, the Panthers' second-leading scorer, had 3 points and 3 assists on just 1-of-6 shooting.

Payne had 4 points and two boards; Snow added 3 points and four rebounds.

Freshman Hayden Hughes chipped in 2 points and a rebound; John went scoreless but grabbed five boards with two assists, a steal and a blocked shot.

The Panthers shot 51% from the floor and 46% from behind the arc, but lost the turnover battle 20-13, were out-rebounded 38-30 and outscored 34-28 in the paint.

Commerce hit just 39% from the field, 32% from 3-point territory and 9 of 17 (53%) at the line; Union County hit 4 of 6 (67%) at the charity stripe.

The Panthers begin Region 8-AA play on Tuesday when they host No. 9 Rabun County (12-4) attempting to end a three-game skid to the Wildcats. The Union-Rabun series has remained cyclical over the past quarter-century with the Panthers taking seven-straight contests from 2018-2020 before dropping all three meetings last year.

Between 2009-2016, Rabun County won 15 of 18 after Union County won 24 of 30 between 1995-2008 -- a span that included a 17-game Panthers' winning streak.

The Wildcats enter Tuesday's 8-AA showdown off a 63-61 Battle of the States' loss to Towns County. Among the common opponents between Union

and Rabun is Commerce, who Rabun defeated 66-46.

Rabun owns a 72-55 win over Cherokee Bluff, who edged Union back in November. Although, Habersham Central downed the Wildcats 84-67 while Union County picked up two wins over the Raiders.

Rabun is led by All-State senior wing Connor McKay, who enters averaging just under 24 points, 10 boards and two blocks a game while shooting 83% at the line.

Others to watch are senior guards Gus Hood (14 ppg, 5 apg, 2 spg) and Grayson Carver (11 ppg, 3 rpg, 46% 3FG). Senior forward Clayton Dixon's 5.1 rebounds are second on the team and sophomore Cooper Welch averages 6 points and 4 boards a game.

Six-foot-5, 280-pound senior Bear Old joined the Wildcats on Dec. 17 and has averaged 3.5 points and 5 rebounds in four games. The all-state offensive lineman recently signed to play football at Montana State.

"We're going to have to be more consistent," Garrett said regarding the keys to victory against Rabun. "I feel like when we're consistent, and play the way we're capable of playing, we can beat anyone left on our schedule. We have to avoid the mental breakdown. That's one thing that hurts us more than anything -- keeping that urgency from play to play and not falling asleep. If we can buckle down and remain urgent, then it's going to be a dog fight for sure."

The girls' tip-off is scheduled for 6 p.m. Tuesday with the guys to follow.

On Friday, Union travels to Banks County (4-13), who lost by double-digits to Towns County, Habersham Central and Cherokee Bluff. However, the Leopards own a pair of blowout victories over Commerce.

The Panthers host Elbert County (2-13) on Saturday for Senior Night. The only common opponent between the two is Rabun Gap, who defeated both teams by double digits.

Elbert has faced a brutal non-region schedule but owns a 57-56 win over East Forsyth (6-10) and a 56-41 victory over Josey (2-11).

Friday's Banks County girl's game tips at 7 p.m. in Homer. Saturday's action begins at 5 p.m. with the Senior Night festivities between varsity games.

Swimming: Hot Chocolate Meet results

Clarksville - Union County High School Swimming started the new year off with a resounding success as the men and women's teams journeyed to the Habersham Natatorium for their first event of 2022.

Panther swim teams made Union County proud at the Habersham Hot Chocolate meet. Swimming with tenacity and determination, the teams accomplished one of their best meets of the season. With only a few events left before state competition, the swimmers honed their techniques in hopes of lowering their personal best times.

Lily Helton broke the long-standing 500-yard Freestyle UCHS record.

If you're looking to swim for Panther Nation, come see them compete and see if you have what it takes to be a member.

The Habersham Rec Center hosted our seventh swim meet of the season for our relentless Panther High Swim team, taking place on Jan. 8, 2022 at their natatorium. This was one of the largest meets they have competed in, with 16 teams in attendance.

Under the guidance of our outstanding coaches, Kelly Helton and Megan Foster, and with the slogan of "Live Long and Swim," the UCHS team competed against multiple schools with phenomenal results:

Overall High School: 10th; Overall Men: 10th; overall Women: 8th.

UCHS Men's Results: 200 Individual Medley (14 competitors): Hunter White - fifth/



Lily Helton set a school record time in the 500 freestyle event.

personal best. 100 Freestyle (59 competitors): Nicholas Nushtayev - sixth; Grayden Cobb - 19th; Gabriel Panter - 38th.

50 Freestyle (69 competitors): White - fifth; Nushtayev - ninth; Cobb - 24th.

UCHS Women's Results: 500 Freestyle (11 competitors): Lily Helton - third/school record.

200 Medley Relay (16 teams): Eighth Place.

200 Freestyle Relay (23 teams): Sixth and 13th Place.

100 Breaststroke (35 competitors): Meghan Cory - 13th; Brooklyn Brown - 15th; Hannah Kazmierzak - 22nd.

100 Backstroke (38 competitors): Courtney Foster - 14th; Lily Collins - 27th; Cassie Flowers - 29th.



Union County swimmers at Habersham last weekend.

Wrestling: Panthers take third at Area Duels tourney, qualify for State



Union County wrestling (pictured after winning last month's King of the Mountains tournament at Towns County) will compete in the Class AA State Duels tournament on Saturday, Jan. 15 at Pace Academy. The Panthers punched their ticket to state with a third place finish at last weekend's Area Duels tournament in Homer. Union County finished behind first-place Fannin County and second-place Banks County. Rounding out the Area's state representatives is fourth-place Rabun County. Later this month, the Panthers will take part in the individual Area tournament at Fannin County. Photo/Todd Forrest

The Benton Mackaye Trail Association January 2022 Hikes

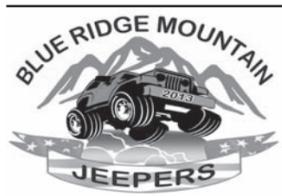
The current social distancing and health rules are used by hike Leaders.

10 (Monday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail association sponsors an easy/moderated 4.5 mile hike Amadahy trail at Carter's Lake. This will be a leisurely hike. Leaders: Evelyn and Doug Yarns For more info, contact HikeleaderEY@bmtamail.org

14 (Friday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail association sponsors a moderate 4.3 mile hike on the BMT from Three Forks to No Name Bald and back. Dog friendly hike (adult humans may bring a leashed dog). Largely uphill going and reverse returning. Approximately 700' of elevation change each way. We'll include a side trip to Long Creek Falls. Hike leader is Ken Cissna. For more information, contact hikeleaderKC@bmtamail.org.

17 (Monday) - The Benton MacKaye Trail association sponsors a moderate 6.5 mile hike at Thunder Rock Express on to Chestnut Mountain trail

to BMT trail down to Thunder Rock Campground. Whitewater Center in Ducktown, TN. Hike Leaders: Tom & Carolyn Sewell. For more info, contact HikeleaderTS@bmtamail.org.



BEEP BEEP! That's Jeep speak for "Join Us!"

If you own a Jeep and like to ride the mountains and trails, see local sights, and enjoy other Jeep enthusiasts, then Blue Ridge Mountain Jeepers is the club for you. We meet the second Friday of every month at the Blairsville Skillet Cafe. Lunch is at 11:30 and the meeting starts at 12:30 p.m. Look us up at www.blueridgemountainjeepers.com or on Facebook. Come and join us. BEEP BEEP! NTJan12.Z7/CA

Soccer registration is open at the Union County Recreation Department

January 11, 2022- February 18, 2022 for ages 5-12.

Age you will be September 1, 2022 determines age group you play in. Season will begin in March. We are happy to announce Chris Robbins will be overseeing Rec Soccer. Fee is \$55.00

Please register online at unioncountyga.gov or in person at the Union County Sports Center located at 519 Industrial Blvd. Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions.

Union County Recreation Department Baseball and Softball Registration

Registration for baseball and softball opens at the Union County Recreation Department January 4, 2022 thru February 18, 2022 for ages 5-14.

Age you will be September 1, 2022 is the age group you will play in. Fee is \$55.00. Please register online at unioncountyga.gov or in person at the Union County Sports Center located at 519 Industrial Blvd. Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions.