

# Sports

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## Union County to resume athletics on a weekly basis

Visiting fans prohibited; only four spectators allowed per player at this week's sporting events

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Union County is setting its sights on a return to athletic competition this week after an uptick in community COVID-19 numbers brought winter sports to a screeching halt earlier this month.

During the Monday, Jan. 4 Union County Board of Education meeting, the school board, Superintendent John Hill and UCHS Athletic Director Mandy Hunter halted winter sports for the upcoming week. However, following another meeting on Friday, Jan. 8, Hunter informed the *North Georgia News* during a scheduled interview that sports will resume this week with strict safety guidelines in place for players, fans and parents.

"We are just trying to do everything we can do to make sure our student-athletes will get to play their region games and middle school tournaments," Hunter said.

According to Hunter, no visiting spectators are allowed at UCHS or middle school sporting events during the current week. Furthermore, Union County will decline to participate in athletic competitions with schools not offering face-to-face learning. (As of this writing, all upcoming opponents provide in-person classes.)



Union County Athletic Director Mandy Hunter (L) and Union County Superintendent John Hill have remained busy in recent weeks dealing with COVID concerns within the community and athletic department. Photos/Todd Forrest

UCHS and UCMS event admission will be limited to four attendees per Union County player, with each athlete allotted four tickets a game. Additionally, no concessions will be available and mandatory face coverings and temperature checks are required at the front gate upon entry. Parents will receive a

letter this week detailing ticket distribution and the updated safety measures.

Later this week, Hunter and the Union County administration will meet again to determine the course of action for the following week (Jan. 21-25). Hunter stressed that the safety measures are set in stone for the



current week only and will be readdressed weekly with the possibility of an easing or tightening of restrictions at each meeting.

"This is temporary and we're going week-to-week until the [community's COVID-19] numbers start to go down," she said. "And we won't be playing any schools that offer online

learning as their only option due to their COVID-19 community concerns."

At last Friday's meeting, Union County was given the go-ahead to compete in all games and matches between Jan. 11-15. This Friday's meeting will determine the fate of next week's games, including

Saturday's region-opening visit to Rabun County.

Hunter cited a lack of contact tracing over the holidays when asked what evoked the increased concern over sporting events while in-person classes and practices continued during the stoppage.

"Over the [Christmas] break, there was no contact tracing among athletes, so we want to get a better feel of where the surrounding counties are before heading into region play and the middle school tournaments," she said.

Union County Basketball expects to return Friday with a girls-only meeting vs. Rabun Gap. Then, if approved, Union will participate in the Region 8-AA opener at Rabun County on Saturday.

Meanwhile, Union County wrestling is scheduled to visit Banks County on Tuesday. But according to head coach Justin Byer on Sunday evening, that match's status is in question. On Friday, Union will travel to Fannin County for the Area 8 Duals Tournament.

At this time, Union County is the only local school not allowing visiting spectators, so Panther fans can attend this week's wrestling matches at Fannin and Banks. As previously mentioned, the status of Saturday's Rabun County basketball game will be determined on Friday.

## Union County Basketball prepping for a return to the hardwood

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If all goes as planned, Union County basketball will take the court this weekend, marking the school's first hoops contest in five weeks.

With only four games under their belts during the 2020-21 season, Union County hopes to complete its 8-AA schedule before the Region 8-AA Tournament gets underway next month. This year's tournament will be hosted by the boys No. 1 seed.

On the heels of its fall-sports cancellation, once again, Riverside Military Academy will not participate in winter sports, leaving only four teams in Region 8-AA and guaranteeing a state playoff spot for both Union County basketball programs.

With another post-season berth locked down, head coaches Crystal Beach and Corey Garrett are attempting to make the best of a difficult situation as their respective squads await the go-ahead to dive into the January stretch run.

Although, the situation has proven extra challenging for Garrett's Panthers, who have remained quarantined since Dec. 29. With practice expected to resume this week, the focus won't entirely be on the upcoming opponent. Instead, Garrett aims to get his squad back in shape following a two-week lay off.

"To be honest, all we're worried about right now is getting back in shape and finding a little bit of rhythm," Garrett said. "It will take us every bit of these four days to get back into a decent shape."

"At the same time, the competitor in me wants to beat Rabun County [on Saturday]. It's a rivalry and you always want to beat them, but right now, we just want to get back



Union County Lady Panthers head coach Crystal Beach (L) and Panthers head coach Corey Garrett (R) are each dealing with a unique set of challenges as they prepare their respective squads for region play this week. Photos/Todd Forrest

into shape and get out of that game without anyone getting injured."

The Panthers hope to resume play on Saturday, Jan. 16 with a visit to Rabun County, which currently sports a 2-13 record but owns a 55-43 home win over the same Fannin County squad that rallied from 19-down to edge Union in the Panthers' last outing on Dec. 12.

"We were coming off our best three or four days of practice and we were really starting to turn it around when we got shut down," Garrett said. "But I think we'll be able to bounce back rather quickly. We were almost there, so it's not like we have a ways to go.

It's all going to come down to how quickly we can get back to where we were before [the quarantine]."

Meanwhile, Beach's Lady Panthers will benefit from one tune-up game when they host winless Rabun Gap on Friday in a girls-only contest. Recently, the Eagles were the victims of a 57-29 loss to Rabun County after falling behind 33-12 at halftime.

Despite the layoff, Beach is doing everything in her power to keep her girls in mid-season form with aggressive practices and situational simulations. However, according to the second-year coach, anytime the Lady Panthers can come together as a team,



she considers it a step in the right direction for her young squad.

"We've had great practices, and we just continue to focus on what we can control," she said. "Our girls have been resilient with the changes that have been happening day-to-day. They're continuing to push each other and hold each other accountable and just trying to get better. That's been really cool to see as a coach."

"Losing practices, even back in the summer, is a difficult situation for everyone, but it's especially difficult for us with our inexperience. So we've been trying to install some game-like scenarios in practice, and the girls seem to

be responding well to it."

With a top-five Rabun County squad right around the corner, the Lady Panthers' focus has not changed. Beach continues to emphasize defense and piecing together four solid quarters of basketball.

Still, one area she never loses an sleep over is her team's worth ethic.

"There has not been a time where our girls have taken the floor and not given 110%," she said. "That's a really good thing to see any season, but especially when you consider what we've dealt with during our season up until this point."

"We may have a younger squad, but from our freshman on up, our maturity shows and

our girls realize that anytime we can take the floor it's a win. Even if it's only a practice, we consider it a win because so many other teams have not been able to even do that."

Friday's Rabun Gap contest is slated for a 6 p.m. tip-off. Saturday's visit to Rabun County will get underway at 5:30 p.m.

"I want to give a shout out to everyone that's behind us," Garrett added. "I know we've only played four games, but it's taken a lot of work just to get those four in. We appreciate everyone's patience and understanding and we just hope we can get back to playing ball before it's too late."