

Sports

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Panthers secure 3-seed entering next week's region tourney

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Union County locked up third place in Region 8-AA with weekend victories over Rabun County and Putnam County. Unfortunately, their pursuit of the top spot went out the window Tuesday night with a 54-49 loss to Social Circle.

Currently, the Panthers are two games back of second-place Banks County, who Union County hosts on Tuesday, but with two games to play, the best head coach Corey Garrett's squad can hope for is a tie, and Banks owns the tiebreaker over the Panthers.

"I don't have a preference (of who we draw in the first or second round)," Garrett said. "I don't really want to play anyone over someone else. I just want us to finish this final week strong. I feel like we're coming on at the right time, with the exception of Social Circle, where we couldn't get a layup to drop. But I feel like we're getting very close to playing our best basketball. We're getting there. We're close and we just can't let up."

Unfortunately, Union County must play out the season without its leading 3-point marksman, Lake Hughes, who was lost to a broken arm vs Social Circle and could be sidelined for up to eight weeks.

Although, there is a little bit of good news. The opening round of both region tournaments will likely be hosted by Union County as the No. 3 seed on the girls' side was named the predetermined host before the season.

The location of the final two rounds has yet to be determined and will be settled during next Friday's Putnam County at Rabun County girls game, with the winner hosting the region semifinals, along with the consolation and title games.

Just like the location of the final two rounds, Union County's first-round opponent has yet to be determined. The likely candidates are Putnam County, Elbert and Monticello.

Currently, fifth-place Putnam leads sixth-place Elbert by one game and seventh-place Monticello by two. Putnam can guarantee itself at least a 5-seed by knocking off Elbert on Tuesday. That would leave the 6-seed (Union's opponent) in a two-way battle between Monticello and Elbert, who meet on Friday -- assuming Monticello defeats Oglethorpe County on Tuesday.

There is still a possibility that fourth-place Rabun County, who leads Putnam County by a game, could create further chaos by losing to both Social Circle and Putnam. When those two losses are combined with Elbert winning out, the prospects of a three-way tie for fourth



Senior Pierson Allison with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Sawyer Drake with family. Photo/Todd Forrest

(Elbert, Putnam, Rabun) enter the picture.

To summarize: No. 3 Union and No. 8 Oglethorpe are the only locks. As for the other six, a few positions could be sewn up on Tuesday, but the full tournament slate won't be set in stone until late Friday night.

Banks and Social Circle still have eyes on first. Rabun, Putnam and Elbert are all in contention for fourth. Monticello is in seventh but could jump to fifth if the stars align.

Union County also celebrated Senior Night prior to Saturday's win over Putnam and Coach Garrett discussed coming full circle with this group of seniors after having them for two years in middle school.

"I had them in seventh grade for my very first coaching job and we had a pretty good year," he said. "We won the championship in eighth grade and always talked about how we wished we could go to high school together. Then we were able to when I helped former boys coach Casey (Jones) for a year.

"Then, being able to get them again during their senior year, I won't say it's a storybook ending since it's not over yet and we're still writing this story, but so far, it's kind of been that way. I love them all to death.

"Honestly, they're like little brothers to me. I love all the kids, obviously, but this is the last class that knew me before (I moved up to coach high school)."

Panthers 59, Putnam County 42 - Senior Sawyer Drake scored a game-high 19

points, including 11-straight in the second half, to lead Union County to the season-sweep of the War Eagles and secure the No. 3 seed in next week's Region 8-AA Tournament.

Trailing 12-9 at the half-way point of the first quarter, the Panthers stormed ahead with a 10-1 run and held a 19-17 lead after one. Senior point guard Pierson Allison led Union County with 8 points in the opening frame, all coming in the paint or at the foul line.

Allison began the second by driving inside for a bucket as the Panthers scored the first five points of the period. Still leading 24-21, Union County scored 10-unanswered to take a 34-23 advantage into the break.

Allison and Drake led the Panthers with 10 points each, while Kyle Morlock added seven and Kaston Hemphill had three in the half.

In the third, the War Eagles battled to within five at 36-31 but Union County closed out the quarter on an 8-1 spurt. Drake accounted for the final five Panther points of the frame, then scored his team's first six points of the fourth as Union built a 50-34 lead at the five-minute mark.

Morlock put the finishing touches on an impressive Senior Night showing with a thundering two-handed slam, giving the Panthers a 55-35 advantage with three minutes left.

The senior duo of Allison and Morlock chipped in 13 and 11 points, respectively, while fellow fourth-years Sawyer Brey (6), Cayden Rich (4) and Bryson Lariscy (1) combined for 11 more.



Senior Sawyer Brey with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Bryson Lariscy with family. Photo/Todd Forrest

Junior Kaston Hemphill finished with three and sophomore Logan Helcher scored two.

Drake led the way with nine rebounds, Hemphill hauled in eight boards, Allison grabbed six and Helcher pulled down five.

Helcher and Hemphill were tops on the team with two assists each as Allison, Drake and Rich dished out one dime apiece.

Allison, Morlock and Drake all recorded three steals, while Brey added one. Brey blocked two shots and Morlock sent back one.

The Panthers shot 45% from the floor and held Putnam to a dismal 28% shooting performance. Both teams struggled from distance, combining to sink just 8-of-37 (22%), with Union hitting 19% and Putnam making 24%.

Additionally, both teams were equally bad at the charity stripe. Union made 10-of-23 for 44% and Putnam hit 7-of-17 for 41%. The Panthers dominated the points in the paint battle 38-22 but finished even on the boards at 40 rebounds each. Putnam crashed the offensive glass (14-11) at a slightly higher clip and won 12-8 on second-chance points.

Union County held a narrow edge in the turnover battle at 19-15, but converted those miscues into 21 points, compared to just 10 points off turnovers for the War Eagles.

Panthers 74, Rabun County 47 - Union County extended its winning streak over the Wildcats to seven games behind 17 points apiece from Allison and Drake.

Lariscy scored three.

Through three quarters, Union County was 67% on 4-of-6 from long distance. They would finish 5-of-12 (42%) from three but shot a blistering 59% from the floor on 26-of-44.

Rabun County was also knocking down shots, hitting 56% on 19-for-34, despite making just 3-of-10 (30%) from downtown. At the line, the Wildcats were 6-of-13 for 46%, while Union made 17-of-28 for 61%.

The Panthers won the paint 38-32 and held a slight edge on the boards, 23-21. Union also forced Rabun into 25 turnovers that led to 28 points.

Panthers 49, Social Circle 54 - The iron was unkind to Union County in the second half as the Panthers were unable to buy a basket during a loss that eliminated them from the top spot in Region 8-AA.

During the second half, Union shot 6-for-25 in the paint -- 5-of-19 coming at point-blank range.

"Our defense was pretty solid and our offense was executing, but it's like there was a lid on the basket," Garrett said. "We missed shots that we never miss. It was a tough loss because it was a game we really wanted and you can't really explain it. It was just kind of a freak thing."

Less than 11 minutes into the contest, Union County was in charge with a 24-17 lead at the 5:26 mark of the second quarter.

They would go on to muster only 25 points over the final 21-plus minutes.

Still on top 29-28 at the break, the Panthers were clinging to a narrow lead in the early stages of the third when Rich picked up his third foul with 5:28 on the clock. Moments later, the Redskins grabbed their first lead since the game's early stages.

But Union had an answer, as well. Trailing 34-33, Cox and Brey put Union back in front 37-34 with back-to-back buckets.

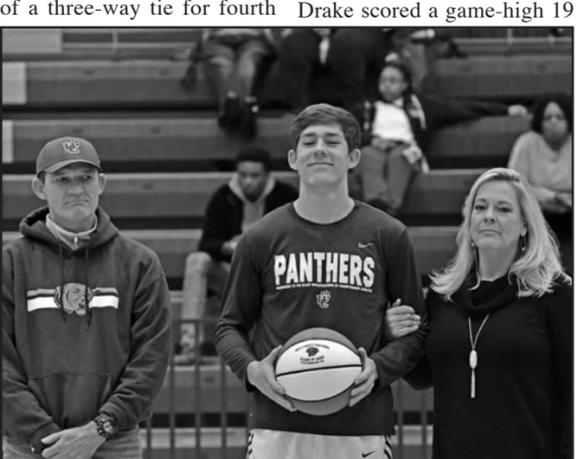
All tied up at 37-37, Allison and Cox put the Panthers on top 41-39, but Social Circle answered in the final seconds to even the score at 41 heading into the fourth.

Cox's dribble-drive for two with 48 seconds left in the third would be the final Union County field goal until Drake drove to the basket with 2:35 remaining, pulling the Panthers within three at 47-44.

In fact, Union would go five minutes without a point until Drake split two free throws at the 3:48 mark to keep his team within one possession at 45-42.

It wasn't just the Panthers that couldn't convert in the fourth, Social Circle went more than three minutes without a point and four minutes without a field goal. Unfortunately, Union's scoring

See Panthers, Page 3C



Senior Kyle Morlock with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



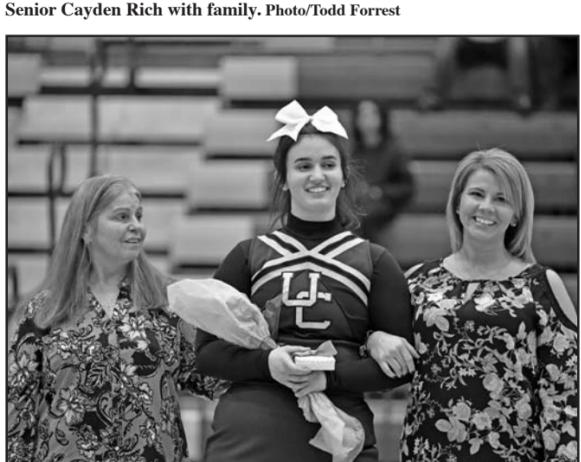
Senior Cayden Rich with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



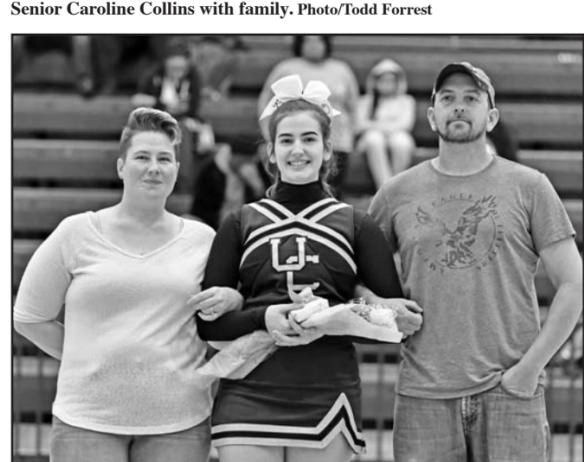
Senior Caroline Collins with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Sierra Deyton with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Anastyne Gibson with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Kiara Martin with family. Photo/Todd Forrest