

# Panthers reach 15 wins; enter Region 8-AA Tournament as No. 4 seed

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Entering the final week of the season, Union County (15-9, 8-6) was locked into the No. 4 seed in the upcoming Region 8-AA Tournament. But that didn't mean the Panthers weren't playing for pride when they visited Banks County on Wednesday and hosted Oglethorpe County for Senior Night on Friday.

In the first meeting with Banks, Union County jumped out to a 14-0 lead only to go scoreless down the stretch while the Leopards closed on a 13-0 run to escape Blairsville with the win.

The second time around, the Panthers fell victim to 13-3 run after leading 60-58 with under two minutes to play. This time around, however, it was Banks County that jumped out to a huge early lead, only to watch the visitors storm back and take control. Unfortunately, the Panthers weren't able to ride that momentum to a victory as Banks County held on for a 71-63 victory.

After narrowly escaping the earlier meeting at Oglethorpe County, Union didn't give the Patriots the chance to hang around on Friday as they outscored Oglethorpe 21-9 in the second quarter before putting the visitors away with a 12-0 run in the early stages of the third.

"I thought we played well from the middle of the second quarter on," Union County coach Casey Jones said. "That was pretty much the case at Banks County too. We've got to do a better job of putting four quarters together when we get into the playoffs."

**Panthers 71, Oglethorpe County 43** -- Union County torched the Patriots 42-16 in the second and third quarters as Oglethorpe County never threatened the Panthers on Senior Night.

Senior Christian Robertson and junior Pierson Allison each scored a game-high 17 points to lead Union County to 15 wins for the sixth time in seven years and the fifth time in six seasons under Jones.

"We made it to 15 wins, which is something that we shoot for," Jones said. "(15 wins) is not a great year but it's a pretty good year."

Getting the start on Senior Night, Robertson joined fellow senior starter Britt Waller in the post and the duo combined for 17 first-half points with Robertson's 11 leading all scorers.

"I go up against Christian in practice so I know from experience how hard he is to stop," Waller said after the game. "He's a big dude and once he gets his momentum going towards the goal, he's almost impossible to slow down."

Meanwhile, Allison hit 7-of-8 from the line in the first half for 9 points. The second half saw the Panther point guard put up seven in the third before splitting a pair of free throws early in the fourth.

As for Robertson, he scored four in the third and two in the fourth to turn in a career-high 17-point performance.

"It was a special night for (Christian Robertson) and something he'll always remember," Jones said.

Waller knocked down a pair of second half free throws to finish with 8 points while a trio of Panthers scored 6 points.

Junior Sawyer Drake began to find his groove following a quiet first half until an elbow to



Senior Kanon Hemphill with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Coleson Daniel with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Jared Nelson with family. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Christian Robertson with family. Robertson scored a career-high 17 points on Friday. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Britt Waller with family. Photo/Todd Forrest

the head cut his night short and sent him to the trainer's table in the third quarter with 6 points.

Seniors Coleson Daniel and Kanon Hemphill also turned in a pair of 6-point performances with Daniel scoring 4 points in the fourth and Hemphill getting all six in the first three quarters.

"I appreciate everything these seniors have done, whether I've had them four years or one year," Jones said. "They're good boys and they've always been respectful. You hate to see them go but you're also excited for (their futures)."

Sawyer Brey returned to action with 5 points after missing the Banks County game due to an ankle injury he suffered at Putnam County.

Senior Jared Nelson, Bryson Lariscy and Colton Day rounded out the Union County scoring with 2 points apiece. In all, 10 Panthers scored in Friday night's win as 71 points marked the first time all season that Union has reached 70 points, ending a streak of 35 games -- dating back to Jan. 5, 2018 vs Lumpkin County -- without reaching 70.

"We started off slow but once we got going the atmosphere inside the gym was great," Waller said. "It was a fun game and I'm just glad we could get the win."

**Panthers 63, Banks**

**County 71** -- After falling behind 29-12 to a hot-shooting Leopard squad, Union County closed the half on a 12-2 run, sending Banks County coach Mike Cleveland kicking and screaming into the locker room.

Despite the halftime tirade from Cleveland, the Leopards came out flat in the third as the Panthers turned a 32-24 deficit into a 52-47 advantage at quarter's end.

After trading baskets for much of the third period, Banks County managed to open up a 10-point advantage at 43-33 with a trey at the 4:30 mark but Allison answered with a triple of his own on the ensuing possession.

A reverse-layup stretched the Leopard lead back to nine but Drake scored inside followed by a Hemphill steal-and-score and a transition three from Allison. Banks momentarily halted the run with a driving layup that pushed the margin back to four with 1:46 left in the quarter but Hemphill and Drake both answered with a bucket to even the score at 47-47.

With 16 seconds remaining in the period, Allison was fouled after a Leopard turnover resulted in a breakaway layup on the other end. The 3-point play gave the Panthers their first lead of the game but Allison wasn't finished

as he went coast-to-coast in the final seconds to beat the buzzer with a layup that gave Union a 52-47 lead entering the final frame.

The first five points of the fourth belonged to Banks as they evened the score with 6:12 left. Allison sank two free throws but the Leopards regained the lead with a 3-ball on the other end. With 4:56 remaining, Banks appeared to open up some breathing room with another triple for a 58-54 advantage but Drake and Hemphill sparked a 6-0 spurt that gave Union a 60-58 lead with 2:24 to play.

The Leopards tied it back up at the 1:56 mark, then took a 63-60 lead with a three, 18 seconds later. Following a 1-and-1 miss by the Panthers, Banks extended its lead to 65-60 then used a Union turnover to make it a 67-60 game with 48 seconds left.

After a 1-and-1 miss by Banks, Allison drilled a three to cut the margin to four with 17 seconds remaining but that's as close as they would get.

Prior to closing with a 13-3 run, the Leopards opened with six-straight en route to a 16-6 lead and a 19-10 advantage after one. Banks continued firing on all cylinders well into the second period as they held the upper-hand at 29-12 with 3:40 before halftime.

Allison would score 8 of

## REGION 8-AA TOURNAMENT SCHEDULE - GUYS

**Monday, Feb. 4 @ Elbert County**

GAME 1: 4:00 - No. 6 Rabun Co. vs No. 3 Social Circle  
GAME 2: 5:30 - No. 7 Monticello vs No. 2 Banks Co.  
GAME 3: 7:00 - No. 5 Putnam Co. vs No. 4 **Union Co.**  
GAME 4: 8:30 - No. 8 Oglethorpe Co. vs No. 1 Elbert Co.

**Thursday, Feb. 7 @ Elbert County**

5:30 - Winners of Game 1 and Game 2  
8:30 - Winners of Game 3 and Game 4

**Friday, Feb. 8 @ Elbert County**

5:30 - Region 8-AA Consolation Game (Thursday losers)  
8:30 - Region 8-AA Championship Game (Thursday winners)

## Cross Roads Baptist 1st Annual Coon Hunt



Cross Roads Baptist Church, 119 Cobb Mountain Road, Blairsville, First Annual Coon Hunt will be held on Saturday, February 9th.

Check in beginning: Anytime between 5-6 PM, if you're not here by 6:30 PM, you can't hunt.

Check in end: Between 11-11:15 PM. If you're not here by 11:30 PM you will be disqualified.

There will be refreshments at the church by 5 PM, so come eat, then go hunt.

# Wrestling: Union sends four to Sectionals; more could qualify as alternates

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**ELBERTON** - Christian Martinez, Issac Tritt, Logan Tritt and Sean Phillips have all punched their tickets to this weekend's Class AA State Sectionals in Bremen.

Meanwhile, Alex Barrett, Landon Clark, Brady Guild, Trevor Guild, JJ Littles and Eli Smith-Foot could also end up in Bremen as alternates after placing fifth at Area.

According to Union County coach Justin Byers, there is a very good chance that multiple Union County wrestlers will be needed this weekend.

However, as of press time on Monday, it remains unclear how many alternates will end up getting the nod.

"Coming in we knew there were at least six or seven guys that could qualify for sectionals," Byers said. "We're a young team with only three seniors and we tied a (program) record with four going to sectionals so I'm very proud of them."

Four Union County wrestlers already know their fate after placing in the top four at



Union County's four top-four finishers at Area (L-R): Christian Martinez, Issac Tritt, Logan Tritt and Sean Phillips. Photo/Todd Forrest

Saturday's Area Tournament in Elbert County.

Christian Martinez was Union's lone finalist, finishing second at 182 pounds. The junior earned a first round bye before

pinning Social Circle's Zeb Hutcheson in the semifinals.

In the finals, Martinez would fall to Elbert County's BJ Bradford, who entered the match with a near-perfect record

of 42-1.

Meanwhile, at 152 pounds, senior Issac Tritt bounced back with a pair of victories to place third after dropping the opener to Oglethorpe County's Zeke Hull,

the eventual runner-up.

Issac Tritt went on to score wins over Monticello's Blane Marat and Social Circle's Hunter Muse in the consolation bracket.

Logan Tritt placed third at 160 pounds after the senior was victorious in round one, scoring a pinfall over Monticello's Dalton Franklin.

Elbert's Brice Noggle defeated him in the second round but Logan Tritt responded with wins over CJ Wilkes of Oglethorpe and Trent Edmondson of Banks County.

Freshman Sean Phillips rounded out Union County's four automatic qualifiers with a fourth place finish at 170 pounds.

Phillips dropped a pair of matches to Monticello's Tristen Light in the first and final bouts.

Sandwiched between the matches with Light was a win over Banks County's Josh Stapleton to clinch a spot in the final four.

As for the fifth place finishers and potential alternates, Barrett is an alternate at 145 pounds, Clark is at 106, Brady Guild is 132, Trevor Guild competed at 138, Littles saw action at 126 and Smith-Foot wrestled in the 285-pound (Heavyweight) class.

Sectionals are scheduled for Friday and Saturday in Bremen with the State Championships in Macon on Feb. 13-16.