

Sports

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Wrestling: Panthers claim six Area titles, team championship

By Todd Forrest
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Blue Ridge - Union County wrestling rolls into this weekend's Class AA State Sectionals fresh off six individual area championships and the overall team title during last Saturday's Area 8 Traditional tournament at Fannin County High School.

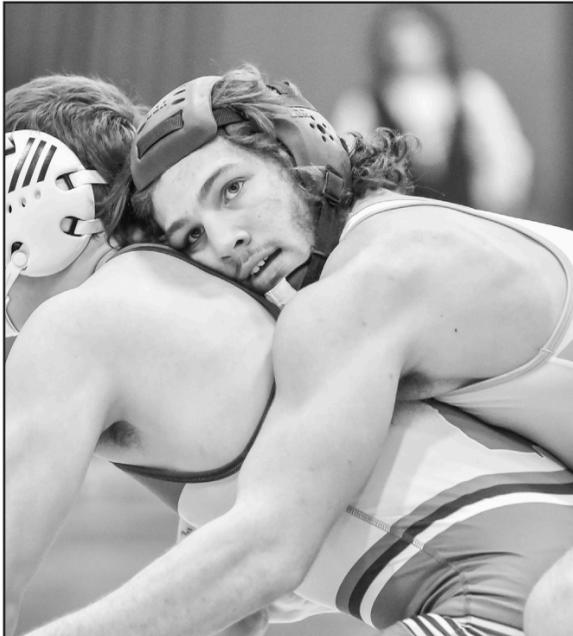
Seniors Anderson Clouse (138 lbs) and David Heredia (190) headlined Union County's first-place finishers, along with juniors Payton Legatt (157) Asa Smith-Foot (175) and freshmen Eli Flowers (106) and Paxton Legatt (144).

Runner-up finishes went to juniors Dusty Aaron (215), Andrew Engle (165) and senior Zander Rotko (150).

Union County doubled its three gold medals from last year's Area tournament while Clouse, Heredia and Payton Legatt each secured back-to-back area titles.

Clouse clinched his second-straight Area 8 crown via a 13-4 major decision over East Jackson's Ryan Lampe. In his opening-round bout, Clouse needed only 81 seconds to pin Fannin's Logan Thompson.

Heredia, the 190-lb topseed, earned a bye into the finals, where he pinned Banks County senior Christian Holcombe



Senior David Heredia during the 190-lb title match, ending with his second straight Area 8 title. Photo/Todd Forrest

during the final seconds of the first round.

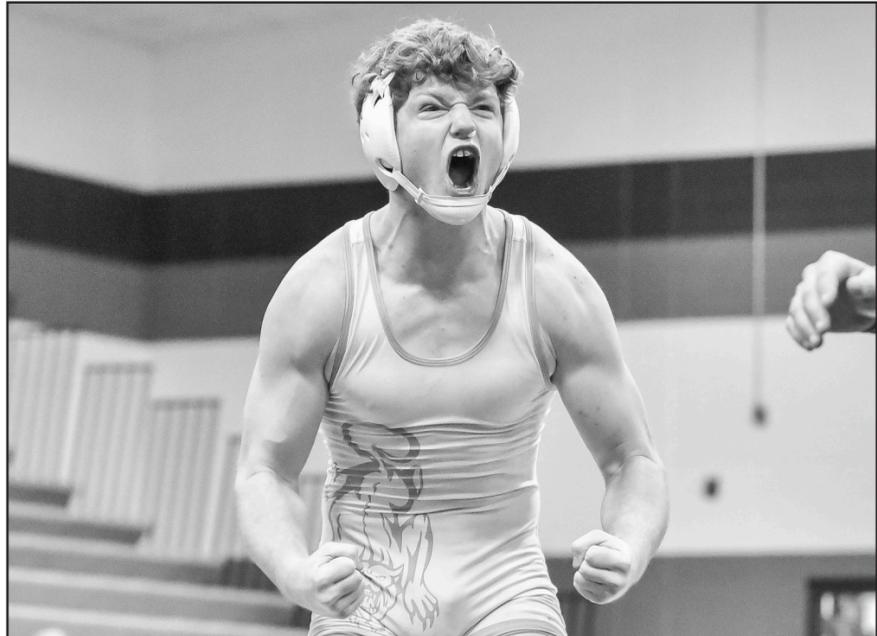
Payton Legatt advanced behind a 17-1 technical fall during his opening bout vs. Fannin's Braylin Merrill, then scored a first-round pin over East Jackson's Evan Reed during the finals.

At 175, Smith-Foot received a bye into the finals and built a 12-2 lead before pinning East Jackson's Jazil Lester with

58 seconds remaining.

Paxton Legatt notched a 7-5 sudden victory over Banks County senior Elijah Mullins, who forced the extra time via a 2-point reversal with 8 seconds remaining. But Paxton Legatt's 2-point takedown during the opening moments of sudden death handed the freshman the Area 8 title.

Following a bye, Flowers took down East Jackson senior



Junior Asa Smith-Foot following his 175-lb title match victory, handing him a second Area 8 championship in as many years. Photo/Todd Forrest

Charlie Wheeler via an 8-0 major decision after taking control with a 7-0 margin through the first 4 minutes.

Coming in second, Aaron pinned Fannin's Noah Thompson in his opening match before falling via pinfall to Banks County senior Mason Dodd.

East Jackson's Cole Smith pinned Rotko with time running out in the third period. Earlier in the day, Rotko pinned

Fannin's Skyler Queen in 43 seconds during his first match.

Andrew Engle earned a narrow 8-7 decision over East Jackson's Chase Wingfield in his opening-round bout, using a late reversal and 3-point nearfall to cap a 7-point final period. Engle fell via a first-round pinfall to Banks County's Davian Knox during the title match.

Freshman Landon Bell finished third at 126 via a sec-

ond-round pinfall over East Jackson's Robert Hollet.

Sophomores Thomas Gary (132), Riley Mortenson (120) and junior Beau Webster (285) each placed fourth and qualified for Saturday's Sectional tournament at Rockmart.

Union County won its first team traditional area title with 175.5 points, edging East Jackson (162), Banks County (159) and Fannin County (79).



Junior Payton Legatt (157 lbs) picked up his second consecutive Area 8 championship with a pinfall victory over East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County senior Anderson Clouse takes control during his 138-lb title bout, en route to back-to-back Area 8 championships. Photo/Todd Forrest



Freshman Eli Flowers took home the gold medal at 106 lbs during Saturday's Area Championships at Fannin County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Freshman Paxton Legatt during his 7-5 sudden victory over Banks County during the 144-lb title bout on Saturday afternoon. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers look to clinch Region 8-AA's top seed on Tuesday

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The Panthers (19-5, 6-3) are in position to host next week's Region 8-AA tournament as the No. 1 seed for a second straight year with a win at last-place Fellowship Christian on Tuesday, Feb. 6.

Following Saturday's 71-68 loss at Providence Christian, Union County sits in a three-way tie with Providence and Athens Academy, but owns the tiebreaker over both teams. The Panthers momentarily seized sole possession of first place following Tuesday's 84-67 victory over Banks County combined with Athens' loss to Providence.

On Friday, Union County throttled East Jackson 102-71, avenging an earlier loss and eclipsing 100 points for the first time since 2006-07.

Panthers 102, East Jackson 71 - Juniors Houston Henry and Hayden Hughes combined for 54 points and 11 treys as Union County left the Eagles in the dust following a 46-44 second-quarter deficit.

The Panthers shot 50% from downtown, hitting a season-high 15 triples, coming within one trey of a 20-year-old program record.

The hot-shooting Panthers raced ahead to early leads of 7-1, 12-5, 19-9, 22-11 and held a 27-19 advantage after a quarter.

With Union up 42-34 in the second, East Jackson used a 12-2 run to grab its first and only lead at 46-44 before 3s from Jude Ellis, Henry and Hughes sent the Panthers into the break with a 53-46 edge.

Freshman Jaxon Totherow, Hughes and Henry bumped the Union lead to 59-46 early in the third, and then a Hughes trey capped the 18-0 run with his team out front 62-46.

The Panthers took a 72-55 lead into the 30-point fourth frame, highlighted by four Hughes triples. Hughes' final trey spotted Union a 99-69 lead with 1:23 remaining before Garrett handed the keys to his reserves.

With under 30 seconds left, freshman Hayden Price



Junior Jude Ellis drives past Banks' Kolby Watson during his 20-point second quarter on Tuesday, Jan. 30. Photo/Todd Forrest

misfired from the corner, but Young chased down the loose ball, awarding Price another try from the top of the circle. His second attempt connected from 22 feet, sending the crowd into a frenzy as the scoreboard read '102-71.'

"At the end of the third, I wasn't even thinking about 100 points, but Hayden got hot and the points started piling up," Garrett said.

Henry finished with 28 points on 9-of-17 shooting and 4 of 8 from long distance. The Union point guard also dished out 8 assists with 4 rebounds and 3 steals. Hughes had 26 points, 10 rebounds and 2 steals on 7 of 9 from 3-point range.

Sophomore Cade Dockrey hit 5 of 8 from the floor and 2 of 2 from deep during a 13-point, 5-assist, 2-steal performance. Ellis finished with 13 points and 5 assists; Totherow had 12 points and 7 boards on 5 of 7 shooting.

Junior Kaden Combs had 5 points, 8 rebounds and 2 steals; Price ended his night with 3 points; Young had 2 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assists and 2 steals.

Birdy Cunningham led East Jackson with 26 points; Qua Watson had 18 points and

11 boards.

Team stats: Union connected on 37 of its 70 (53%) shots, hitting 15 of 30 (50%) from behind the arc and 13 of 21 (62%) at the line. East Jackson made 30 of 63 (48%) from the floor, 6 of 16 (38%) from deep and 5 of 13 (39%) at the charity stripe.

The Panthers won the rebound battle 37-35 and points in the paint 40-36. Union forced 16 turnovers and committed nine.

Panthers 84, Banks County 67 - Union County took its second win over the Leopards in a week behind Ellis' career-high 31 points - 20 in the second quarter.

"When we played at Banks I had 2 points," Ellis said. "But once I got my first shot to fall tonight, I started to feel it after that."

"But it feels good, especially with all the work I've put in. This year has been the most fun, but it's also been the hardest."

After his team trailed 7-0 off the opening tip, Ellis took over in the second quarter, scoring 15 consecutive Panther points as Union built a 35-27 advantage.



Junior Hayden Hughes scored 26 points vs East Jackson, going 7 for 9 from 3-point range in the 102-71 win. Photo/Todd Forrest

During the final 2 minutes of the half, Union grew its lead to 45-29 via a 10-0 run, beginning with Dockrey's bucket in the paint. Hughes' 3 near the 50-second mark opened up a 40-29 lead, then Henry's fast-break layup and Ellis' buzzer-beating trey opened up a 16-point advantage.

Banks briefly made it a game late in the third when two free throws moved the Leopards within four at 57-53 until Ellis nailed a 21-footer from the wing, and a Dockrey steal led to Young's basket and a 62-53 lead at quarter's end.

With 5:20 to play, Ellis' steal resulted in a Hughes layup and a 65-55 lead, and then Henry answered a Banks trey moments later, keeping the margin at double digits. Hughes' transition 3 stretched the margin to 71-58.

Following another Leopards' 3, Ellis rattled off 7-straight points for a 78-61 advantage, and Combs' putback made it 80-61 with 1:46 to play.

"I contribute that win to our defense," Garrett said. "I think we had a great gameplan. At [Banks] we had to go to our backup gameplan and it worked, so we stuck with it when they

came back to our place."

Ellis finished with 31 points, 5 steals and 3 assists on 10 of 16 from the floor and 5 of 10 from deep. Henry had 14 points, 9 assists, 6 rebounds and 3 steals.

Hughes added 14 points, 4 rebounds and 3 steals; Dockrey had 11 points, 5 assists and 4 rebounds; Combs went for 10 points and 5 boards.

Young chipped in 4 points and 2 rebounds; Totherow had 2 rebounds while dealing with foul trouble.

Senior Aaron Scott led Banks with 22 points.

Team stats: Union hit 31 of 58 (53%) from the floor, 10 for 28 (36%) from deep and 12 of 16 (75%) at the line. Banks shot 27-for-58 (47%) overall, 6 of 22 (27%) from 3-point range and 7 of 12 (57%) at the line.

Banks out-rebounded Union 37-25 and 11-3 on the offensive boards; points in the paint were even at 42-42. The Panthers forced 26 turnovers and committed 17.

Panthers 68, Providence 71 - Union County nearly erased an 18-point second-half deficit in Lilburn, but its potential game-tying basket was blocked

with under 30 seconds to play on Saturday.

Less than 24 hours removed from scoring 30 points in the fourth period of a 102-outburst vs. East Jackson on Friday, the Providence defense stifled the Panthers during the first 16 minutes, sparking the Storm's 35-20 halftime advantage.

"I challenged the guys at halftime, but I don't know what happened in the first half," Garrett said. "[Providence] did a good job guarding us and we didn't any ball movement and gave up too many open looks."

Providence led by as many as 18 during the third before Henry's floater narrowed the gap to 52-39 entering the fourth. The Storm maintained its 13-point lead inside the 5-minute mark and led 62-51 with under 3 minutes left.

Dockrey completed a 3-point play to move Union within eight, then Henry's and-1 made it 62-59 with 1:38 remaining. Down 66-60, Ellis' 3 cut the lead in half near the minute mark.

Following a Providence free throw and a Union basket, the Panthers had a chance to tie or take the lead when the Storm threw away an inbounds pass with 35 seconds left. But Union's shot was turned away, and Providence hit a pair of free throws for a 69-65 score at the 20-second mark.

Another Ellis' 3 moved the Panthers within a point with under 10 seconds left but Providence knocked down a pair with 3 seconds left, and Henry's prayer at the buzzer sailed wide left.

Henry finished with 27 points, Ellis had 19 and Dockrey added 10. Totherow had 7 points before fouling out early in the fourth, Hughes had 3 points and Combs chipped in 2 points.

Samuel Thacker scored 20 points (14 in the first half) for the Storm. No additional stats were available.

Up next: The Panthers visit Fellowship Christian in Tuesday's regular season finale with a chance to wrap up the top spot in Region 8-AA. With a victory, Union County will reach 20 wins for the first time since 2006-07.

Lady Panthers fall in OT to No. 4 Banks, will finish second in 8-AA

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Union County will enter next week's Region 8-AA tournament as the No. 2 seed following a heartbreaking overtime loss to No. 4 Banks County on Tuesday, Jan. 30.

The Lady Panthers (14-10, 7-2) bounced back over the weekend with victories over East Jackson and Providence Christian, equaling their win total from last year's 14-14 season with one game left in the regular season.

The girls' Region 8-AA tournament tips off next week at Banks County, where Union likely faces Athens Academy in the opening round.

Lady Panthers 49, No. 4 Banks County 51 (OT) - Trailing 49-47 with 16 seconds remaining in overtime, junior Katelyn Brown evened things up, knocking down two from the charity stripe. But Banks County answered out of a timeout, scoring inside with under 5 seconds left, and the Lady Panthers failed to get off a shot before time expired.

Union County trailed 9-3 after a quarter of the low-scoring affair, then faced an uphill climb for much of the first half, trailing 13-4 until a 6-0 spurt narrowed the gap to 13-10 at the break.

"I was really proud of the girls," Union head coach Thomas Nelson said. "I think both teams knew what the game meant and came out a little tight."

The Lady Panthers expanded its run to 10-0 to grab their first lead at 14-13 when Brown and Ariel McCarter scored to begin the third.

Banks answered with six straight to mount a 20-14 edge, but Union County fired back with 11-in-a-row for a 25-20 advantage at quarter's end.

Brown scored on a putback for a 27-23 lead before the Leopards stormed back to tie the score at 27-27. Kamryn Mull countered with a trey then fed Lara Turner for a 32-27 edge inside of 4 minutes.

A McCarter trey and a dribble drive kept Union on top 37-34 until a Leopards bucket cut the lead to one with 1:57 to play. On the ensuing Lady Panthers' possession, McCarter scored off an inbounds play and Banks missed on the other end.

Union turned it over with under a minute left and Banks scored on a putback. Up one, another costly turnover led to a 1-of-2 trip to the line for the Leopards with 7 seconds remaining.



Senior Lara Turner vs. Banks County. Turner was unavailable over the weekend due to injury. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Kamryn Mull handed out a team-high 5 assists on Saturday at Providence Christian. Photo/Todd Forrest

Tied at 39-39, the Lady Panthers got a good look at the buzzer, but Paula Robertson's 15-footer bounced off the rim, sending the game to overtime.

Mull knocked down a 3 early in the extra session, but Banks evened the score at 42-42 before Brown split two free throws at the 1:57 mark.

After Brown's miss on the second attempt, the Leopards batted the ball out of bounds, and Brown returned to the line 11 seconds later, sinking both tries for a 45-42 lead with 1:46 left.

Banks County pushed ahead 47-45 on consecutive buckets until McCarter tied it up at the charity stripe with 38 seconds to play. The Leopards raced down the floor, answering with a

go-ahead floater before Brown knotted the score moments later.

McCarter finished with 22 points, 4 rebounds and 3 steals. Brown had 9 points, 14 boards and 2 blocks; Mull ended with 11 points, 3 assists and 2 steals; Hope Taylor added 4 points, 2 boards and a block; Turner had 3 points and 3 boards.

Lady Panthers 79, East Jackson 26 - Eleven players scored for Union County in Friday's Senior Night rout of last-place East Jackson.

"The impact the seniors have had on their teammates is unmeasurable," Nelson said. "The time they have spent dedicated to the sport they love was never, ever a waste of their time and they are better people be-



Senior Morgan Warren scores 2 of her 8 points vs. East Jackson on Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest

cause of it."

The Lady Panthers stormed out to leads of 22-6 after one and 45-11 at the break.

McCarter led the way with 13 points, 4 steals and 3 rebounds. Robertson had 12 points, 3 rebounds and 2 steals. Hensley Adams had 9 points, 4 rebounds and 3 assists.

Senior Morgan Warren had 8 points and 3 rebounds; freshman Nomi Nelson finished with 7 points, 3 steals and 2 rebounds; Taylor had 7 points, 4

rebounds and 2 steals.

Brown ended her night with 6 points, 11 boards, 5 assists, 3 steals and 2 blocks. Mull had 6 points and 5 assists; Sloane Dyer had 5 points and 2 assists; Aubrie Akins finished with 4 points and 8 boards; Mady Adams had 2 points and a rebound.

Freshman Izzy Anthros had a rebound and an assist; freshman Regan Trlica chipped in an assist and a steal.

Lady Panthers 47, Providence 42 - Union survived an

upset bid on Saturday in Lilburn courtesy of 14 second-half points from Brown and McCarter.

Trailing 9-6, Trlica came off the bench to score 5 points, including a trey, pushing Union ahead 11-10. The Lady Panthers grew their lead to 22-14 but Providence scored six straight to move within a basket at the break.

The Storm continued hanging around throughout the third, trailing 33-32 after three.

Union opened up some breathing room at 39-34 with 4:17 remaining, but Providence narrowed the difference to 41-39 near the 2:45 mark. With the Lady Panthers clinging to a 46-44 lead inside one minute, McCarter split two free throws, and then Providence missed two 3s on the other end before Brown put it away with two at the line.

McCarter had 15 points, 3 assists and 2 rebounds. Brown went for 9 points, 5 rebounds and 2 steals; Trlica finished with 7 points, 2 rebounds and 2 steals.

Mull finished with 6 points, 5 assists and 2 steals; Robertson had 6 points, 2 rebounds and 2 steals; Dyer had 2 points and 2 steals; Taylor added 2 points and 2 boards.

Up next: Union County closes the regular season on Tuesday at Roswell's Fellowship Christian.

River City Bank sponsors local Will Harkins, Get Fishing Guide Service and Professional Fisherman

"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams," is what Will Harkins, professional fisherman, keeps at the forefront of his mind. Will, a native of Blairsville, Georgia, has earned the 2023-24 National Professional Fishing League achievement, 2nd Angler of the Year standings, and 4 in 10s in Six Pro Events. River City Bank is proud to sponsor Will as he pursues his dreams as a pro fisherman and entrepreneur.

Scott Nanney, River City Bank's Market President said, "Bankers often see first-hand the perseverance required to grow a business, and we know that the success of our entrepreneurs directly impacts our community. Will is an exemplary model of the type of commitment, character, and competency required to be successful."

"Anything in life I have done, it has been to the fullest and best of my ability. As life progresses, I realize that our one life goes by faster and faster. When you get an oppor-



Scott Nanney, Market President, presents a sponsorship check to Will Harkins, professional fisherman and Get Fishing Guide owner.

tunity, you take it," Will said.

In addition to running a fishing guide business and maintaining his professional fishing status, Will is an active volunteer in the community and in his church. He fishes in 30-40 tournaments per year and is focused on giving back to his hometown community. Follow Will on Facebook (Will Harkins) and Instagram (@will_harkins) or visit his website at Getfishingguide.com.

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