

Sports

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Wrestling: Three Panthers crowned Area 8 champions

By Todd Forrest
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Union County sent seven wrestlers into the Area 8 finals, claiming three championships during Saturday's individual area tournament at Union County High School.

On Friday in Stephens County, Shelby Agacinski placed second at the girls' championships to advance to this week's State Sectionals, which is also in Toccoa. Brooke Kennedy finished fifth and qualified as an alternate for the sectional tournament.

"We crowned three Area champs this weekend, which is the most we've ever had," Union coach Justin Byers said. "I'm extremely proud of them. They've put in a lot of hard work."

In what could arguably be considered Saturday's main event featuring two of Class AA's top grapplers in the boys' 157-lb title bout, Union sophomore Payton Legatt edged Banks County senior Kellon Walley by an 8-6 decision to claim the Area 8 championship.

Walley, who placed third at last year's Class AA State Championships, trailed 6-5 late in the final round but forced overtime via a one-point escape with 19 seconds left.

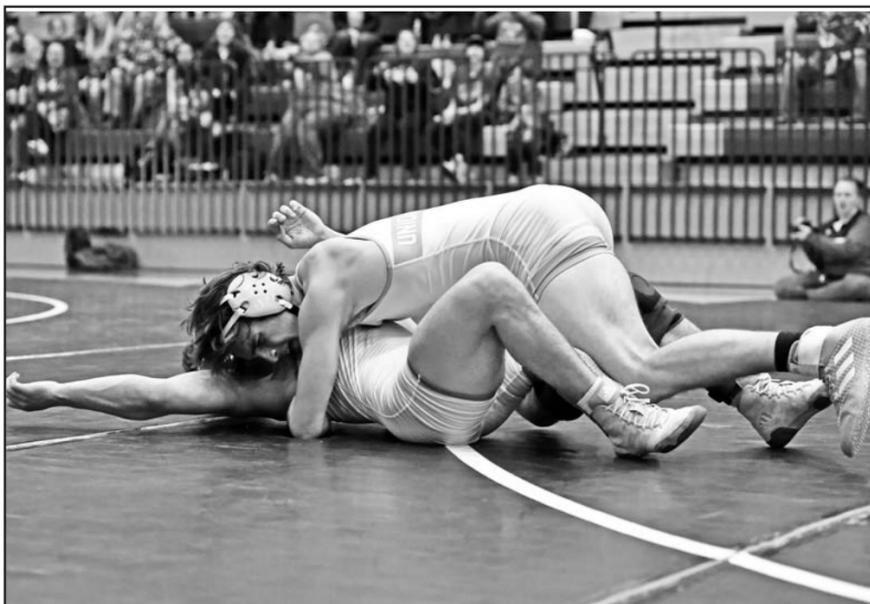
But during the extra session, Legatt scored a two-point takedown to secure the 8-6 sudden victory and take home gold.

Tied at 3-3 during round two, Legatt regrouped from a near fall to seize a 6-5 advantage entering the third and final round.

Legatt reached the title match courtesy of a bye.

Junior Anderson Clouse finished first at 132 lbs, notching a 15-7 major decision over Fannin County senior Thomas Golden during the title match.

Despite the eight-point final margin, Clouse didn't open up any breathing room until round



Union County sophomore Payton Legatt (top) slams Banks County senior Kellon Walley to the mat on Saturday, scoring a two-point takedown and the victory during the sudden-death overtime round of the 157-pound Area 8 championship match in Blairsville. Photo/Todd Forrest

two. The junior scored two take-downs and a reversal in the first two minutes but nursed a 6-5 lead after one round. Things changed quickly over the next 120 seconds with Clouse outscoring his opponent 5-1 to take an 11-6 advantage into round three.

Earlier, Clouse pinned East Jackson's David Kelleher in 38 seconds during the 132-lb opening match.

Last but not least, junior David Heredia picked up his team's final gold medal at 165, notching an 11-5 decision over Fannin senior Colby Shaw.

Heredia took control with 6 points in round two after holding a narrow 2-1 advantage after one. Still on top 8-4 late in round three, Heredia all but locked up his Area title via a takedown with 54 seconds remaining.

Heredia recorded a 20-4 technical fall during his opening bout vs. Banks County's Davian Knox.

Union County freshman Thomas Gary placed second at 120 lbs after scoring a third-round pinfall victory over Fannin County sophomore Landon Poole.

Gary fell to Banks County senior Angel Cruz via a first-round pin during the finals.

Sophomore Asa Smith-Foot finished second at 150 lbs by way of a third-round pin over Fannin County senior Drake Cantrell in his opening bout. Smith-Foot fell into a 5-0 deficit after round one, but a 3-point near fall during the second round helped the sophomore ride the momentum into a 7-6 advantage heading to the final round. Smith-Foot's pin finally ended the contest with 38 seconds left while holding an 8-6 edge.

East Jackson senior Ben Lampe took home the gold at 150 lbs via a round-three pinfall victory over Smith-Foot.

Senior Huck Whisenhunt came in second at 175 after

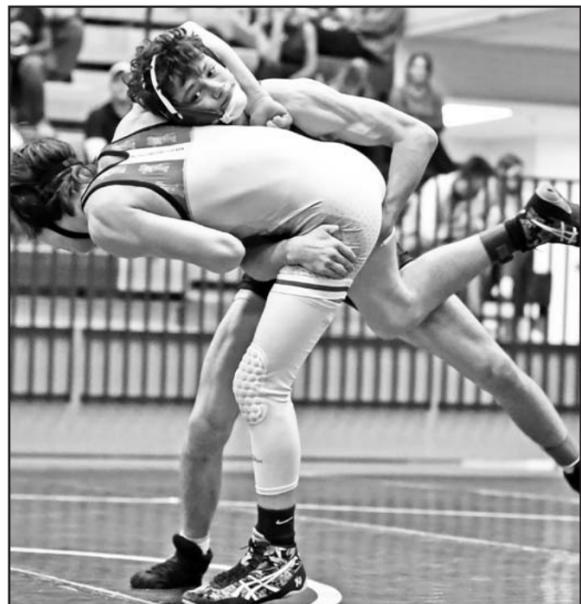
pinning East Jackson's Chase Wingfield in 38 seconds to place second at the tournament. Fannin County senior Corbin Davenport pinned Whisenhunt during round one of the title bout.

The Panthers picked up two third-place finishers, beginning with junior Zander Rotko at 138 lbs.

After falling to the eventual area champion, Fannin County senior Taylor Collis via a first-round pin, Rotko bounced back with a second-round pin of East Jackson's Evan Reed.

In the heavyweight consolation finals, freshman Jackson Arthur needed only 30 seconds to pin fellow 9th grader Matthew Streetman of East Jackson. Arthur suffered a pinfall at the hands of Banks County junior Robert Walker in the opener.

Senior Coleson Lotts (144) and freshman Riley Morttenson (113) each placed fourth with Lotts falling to East Jackson's



Junior Anderson Clouse prepares to drop his opponent during his opening match win vs. East Jackson's David Kelleher. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior David Heredia takes control during his Area title bout vs. Fannin County's Colby Shaw. Photo/Todd Forrest

Kole Smith and Banks' Jordan Myers in the consols.

Morttenson dropped his opening bout to the eventual champion, Blake Summers of Fannin County.

The Union County men will travel to Putnam County on Saturday to participate in the Class AA State Sectionals.

"I see no reason why all of our kids won't finish top-six at sectionals and move on to Macon [for the State Championships]," Byers added.

In other news, Agacinski earned gold during the weekend of Jan. 28th, taking first at the Currahee Girls Grappler tournament hosted by Stephens County.

Turner's career-high 19 leads Lady Panthers to victory at East Jackson

Athens Academy, East Jackson and Union all vying for Region 8-AA's No. 2 seed

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Union County (13-11, 3-4) rebounded from Tuesday's loss at No. 3 Banks County by picking up a 46-41 win at East Jackson (10-14, 3-4) to remain tied for third in 8-AA with one game remaining.

Union County can still finish in a three-way tie for second with a Tuesday win over Fellowship Christian (9-13, 0-7), combined with an Athens Academy loss at East Jackson. Should Athens Academy (16-5, 4-3) knock off East Jackson, the Lady Panthers will take the No. 3 seed behind second-seeded Athens Academy and ahead of East Jackson.

In the event of a three-way tie, the teams will draw numbers from a hat to determine seedings.

Lady Panthers 46, East Jackson 41 - Junior Lara Turner poured in a career-high 19 points on 8-of-14 shooting to go with 11 rebounds and two steals as Union County fended off a late rally by the Eagles.

The Union defense held East Jackson to 26% from the floor and 9% from long distance. And unlike the previous meeting, Eagles senior Antonia Pittman couldn't make up the difference -- attempting only six free throws and finishing 1 of 9 from deep.

"We did a better job defensively on everybody," Union



Lara Turner and the Lady Panthers flushed Tuesday's struggles at No. 3 Banks Co. ahead of Friday's rematch at East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest

head coach Brad Cochran said. "Communication was something we focused on in practice and they did a great job with that. We also did a great job attacking [Pittman] and getting her into foul trouble. That really helped us in the first half."

The Lady Panthers raced out to a 26-13 halftime lead, extending its margin to 30-13 early

in the third quarter. East Jackson trailed 32-24 entering the fourth and stormed back within one at 35-34 near the 4-minute mark before Union County outscored the home team 11-7 the rest of the way.

Junior Kamryn Mull finished with 10 points and a game-high four steals; sophomore Ariel McCarter added 9 points

and sophomore Katelyn Brown collected 10 rebounds.

Following an East Jackson turnover with 3:27 to play, Mull connected from downtown off a feed from senior Corinne Hill to build a 38-34 advantage. The Eagles moved within a deuce at 38-36, but Mull found Turner under the basket for a layup with 2:25 remaining.

inside of two minutes, Brown dove onto the floor to force a jump ball and regain possession.

McCarter took the in-bounds pass and immediately went the length of the court, breaking the press and laying it up on the other end. After an East Jackson miss, Mull made 1-of-2 at the charity stripe with 1:01 left.

Down 44-39, the Eagles missed at the rim and Mull returned to the line with 42 seconds left, where she made both to award Union a 46-39 advantage. East Jackson missed a pair of 3s on its next trip, and with 8 seconds remaining, Brown sealed the win with her 10th rebound of the night.

With time running out, the Eagles converted an uncontested layup to bring the final tally to 46-41.

Hill finished with 4 points, three rebounds, two assists and two steals. Freshman Mady Adams had 2 points, two rebounds and a blocked shot; Brown kicked in 4 points and two steals to go with her double-digit rebounding total.

Freshman Paula Robertson added two assists and two steals. Junior Morgan Warren pulled down a pair of rebounds.

Pittman paced the Eagles with 19 points and three steals.

East Jackson scored the game's first 4 points before Union County answered with a 17-2 run, culminating in a 17-6

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Panthers rout East Jackson after allowing 16 treys in loss at Banks

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Union County's week ended with a victory on Friday, followed by some good news later that night, three days removed from Tuesday's blowout loss at Banks County.

The 89-62 defeat in Homer dropped the Panthers out of a first-place tie in 8-AA, but Union took care of business at East Jackson on Friday and, on their way home, learned that Banks County fell in a 61-60 stunner at Athens Academy. With the Leopards' loss, Union County has clinched a first-round bye in the region tournament, guaranteeing the program's fifth consecutive state playoff berth.

There remains one scenario where the second-place Panthers could host the region tourney as the No. 1 seed, but they will need some assistance from Banks County.

The Leopards, who briefly jumped back into the region title picture for three days with their win over Union, are now locked into 8-AA's No. 3 seed. Although, they could still play spoiler to first-place Providence on Tuesday by knocking off the Storm in Homer. Should Banks County avoid back-to-back region losses and Union County defeat last-place Fellowship Christian, the Panthers and Providence will finish tied atop the standings, leading to a coin toss to determine the No. 1 seed and the host school.

However, there is no scenario where the Panthers can finish lower than second in 8-AA. With a top-two seed in the bag, Union has secured an automatic spot among the region's final four teams via a first-round bye during next week's 8-AA tournament.

Top-two notwithstanding, the region seedings are set with Athens Academy, East Jackson and Fellowship Christian lining up behind the third-place Leopards.

The Panthers host Fellowship Christian in the regular season finale on Tuesday. Varsity action gets underway at 6 p.m.

Panthers 69, East Jackson 46 - Sophomore Hayden Hughes drilled four of his career-best seven 3s during the first quarter, finishing with a game-high 23 points and joining 2004 graduate Blake Williams as the only two Panthers with 70-plus treys in a single season.

"He's just stroking it right now, what more can you say," Union head coach Corey Garrett said. "I knew coming [into the year] he could shoot it pretty



Senior Eli Underwood with family during Senior Night on Jan. 24. The UCHS cheer and swim team senior photos will be featured in an upcoming newspaper. Photo/Todd Forrest

well, but I did not expect this. He has found his rhythm." Union County (16-8, 7-2) grabbed a quick 5-0 lead en route to an 18-6 advantage through one quarter in Nicholson. After senior Eli Underwood and Hughes spotted Union its 5-0 edge, Hughes' second trey and sophomore Maddox Young's breakaway layup awarded the Panthers a 10-2 margin.

Hughes' third trey, this time from the top of the circle, built a 13-4 lead. Later in the first, Young finished another break making it 15-4, then Hughes beat the buzzer with his fourth long-range bomb of the game.

Young pushed Union County out front 20-8 early in the second until the Eagles scored five straight. Freshman Cade Dockrey halted the spurt with two free throws near the 5-minute mark, and Underwood slipped between a low-post double-team a minute later.

The Panthers answered an East Jackson basket with a Houston Henry floater to finish a coast-to-coast drive. Hughes' fifth trey came at the 2:40 mark, and Young completed a three-point play with a right-handed scoop layup and a free throw 48 seconds later.

Young's and-one provided the visitors a 32-15 margin until the Eagles responded with a deuce at 21 seconds, sending Union into the locker room up 15.

Union County put East Jackson away for good with a 30-spot in the third frame resulting in a mercy-rule shortened fourth. Hughes and sophomore Jude Ellis started the surge with 3s to extend the Panthers' lead to 38-17. Ellis added a traditional three-point play courtesy of a baseline drive, and Hughes connected on his seventh trey at 5:35.

Henry stole the ensuing

inbounds pass, resulting in two free throws, and Underwood scored inside, prompting an East Jackson timeout on the heels of a 16-0 run with the score 48-17.

The Eagles scored out of the stoppage, but Ellis immediately attacked the rim for two, and Henry answered East Jackson by blowing past his defender for a layup. Dockrey, Ellis, Hughes and Young added third-quarter buckets and Union County carried a 62-27 rout into the fourth.

Garrett turned to his reserves to begin the 6-minute fourth quarter. Freshman Gunnar Akins connected from downtown, while sophomore Kaden Combs and freshman Vince Marevka added a deuce.

Ellis finished with 11 points, two assists and two steals. Young had 9 points and two assists; Henry's night ended with 7 points, eight boards and four assists.

Underwood pulled down 14 boards to go with 6 points. Dockrey had 6 points, two assists and a block; Akins added 3 points and Combs had 2 points and two rebounds. Marevka chipped in 2 points and one rebound; Anderson Cruise pulled down one rebound.

Birdy Cunningham had 14 for the Eagles.

Team stats: Union -- 26 of 54 (47%) from the floor; 9 of 24 (38%) from three and 6 of 7 (86%) at the foul line; 36 rebounds (8 offensive); 34 points in the paint; 3 second-chance points; 17 turnovers; 14 points off turnovers. EJHS -- 17 for 40 (34%) from the floor; 2 of 16 (13%) from three and 10 of 16 (63%) at the line; 29 rebounds (7 offensive); 28 points in the paint; 2 second-chance points; 14 turnovers; 15 points off turnovers.

Panthers 62, Banks County 89 -- Union County fell

behind 17-1 and would get no closer than a 7-point deficit the rest of the way.

On the heels of their early-game barrage, the Leopards followed suit in each of the next three quarters -- opening the second with a 7-2 spurt, the third on a 9-0 run and 8-0 to begin the fourth.

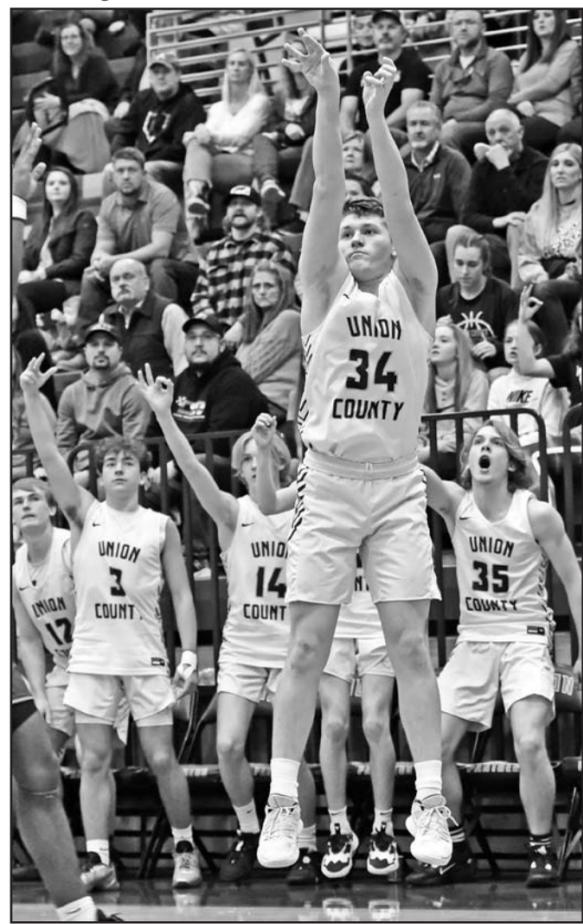
When the dust settled, Banks County hit 55% on 16 for 29 from 3-point territory - drilling seven treys in the first period. Union made just 5 of 27 (19%) from distance.

"I told the guys [after the loss], I said, 'look, we've only lost two region games this year and it has taken the other team going bonkers [from 3-point territory] to beat us. Providence made 15 of 30 and Banks shot 16 for 29. So both of those losses took miraculous shooting nights. It doesn't make the loss feel any better, it's still a loss, but maybe there is something to that."

"After I told the guys that, you could see them perk up a little bit. So, to be honest, I wasn't worried at all about [our state of mind] going to East Jackson. Not to say it can't happen again, and there were a lot of things we did wrong at Banks, but the fact that it took two teams going off to beat us is something we can hang our hat on."

Dockrey, Henry and Underwood scored 16 apiece for the Panthers. Meanwhile, Banks County had four players pour in at least 18 points.

Trailing 17-1 approaching the midway point of the first, Underwood converted a three-point play off a putback, and Henry hit two free throws and drilled a trey for a 17-9 deficit. Dockrey, Henry and Underwood continued carrying the Panthers early, scoring all 12 of their team's points over the final 2:51 of the quarter as the Panthers climbed within



Hayden Hughes fires away from 3-point range during a recent game as the Union County bench erupts behind him. The sophomore sharpshooter entered Friday's game at East Jackson with 63 triples this year -- he departed as the second player (Blake Williams) in program history with at least 70 in a single season. Photo/Todd Forrest

28-21 entering the second. The Union trio accounted for all 21 first-quarter points with Underwood scoring nine, Henry with eight and Dockrey adding four.

An Ellis jumper kept Union within seven to begin the second frame, but the Leopards rattled off five straight for a 35-23 advantage. Banks' lead grew to 15 on four occasions in the period, but an Ellis triple in the final seconds moved his team within a dozen at 48-36.

"I told the guys at halftime, we just need a couple stops and a couple buckets," Garrett said. "But it's like every time we'd land a few jabs, they'd hit us right back with a haymaker."

The Leopards' first 20-point lead came at 57-36 with 6:02 left in the third, eventually expanding the margin to 62-38 at the 4:45 mark. Once again, Union battled back with consecutive buckets by Dockrey and a Hughes 3-pointer, but Banks quickly pushed its lead back to 69-45.

The Panthers' last gasp came via a 10-0 run to close the third, slicing the deficit to 69-55. Underwood scored in

the paint, and Henry connected from deep for a 69-50 score. Hughes crashed the boards for two, Dockrey drove the lane, and Underwood split two free throw attempts, narrowing the gap to 69-55.

Banks started the fourth with two 3s and two free throws to put Union away at 77-55.

Underwood pulled down 18 boards and Ellis finished with 7 points and seven assists. Hughes had 5 points on just 1 of 9 from downtown. Young added 2 points and four boards.

Team stats: Union -- 25 for 69 (36%) from the floor; 5 of 27 (19%) from three and 7 of 12 (58%) at the line; 39 rebounds (17 offensive); 38 points in the paint; 18 second-chance points; 11 turnovers; 9 points off turnovers. Banks -- 35 for 69 (51%) from the floor; 16 for 29 (55%) from three and 3 of 5 (60%) at the line; 41 rebounds (10 offensive); 32 points in the paint; 10 second-chance points; 7 turnovers; 9 points off turnovers.

Up next: The regular season ends Tuesday when Fellowship Christian travels to Blairsville at 6 p.m. Union begins region tournament play Feb. 15.

Lady Panthers... from 2B

second-quarter advantage. After another four-in-a-row by the Eagles, a Hill steal resulted in a McCarter 3-pointer and a 20-10 lead with 3:45 in the second.

Union made it 22-10 when Robertson came up with a steal and promptly found Turner in the paint for two. Still on top 22-13 approaching the minute mark, Brown scored on a putback, then later, Adams converted a weakside offensive board at the buzzer for Union's largest lead of the half at 26-13.

The third quarter got underway with Turner feeding Hill inside for two. Turner was rewarded moments later with a 6-foot jumper off an inbounds pass. Down 30-13, East Jackson's climb began with a steal-and-score at the 4:15 mark, finally inching within single digits at 32-24 on a buzzer-beater from 18 feet.

The Eagles attacked the basket to start the fourth, but Turner answered with 6:42 remaining, pulling up from 16 following Adams' block on the defensive end. Turner pushed the lead back to 36-26 on Union's next possession with a floater off the break, but East Jackson drilled a quick 3 that sparked a 9-0 run.

Team stats: Union -- 17 of 49 (35%) from the floor; 3 of 15 (20%) from three and 9 of 14 (64%) at the line; 34 rebounds (7 offensive); 22 points in the paint; 6 second-chance points; 21 turnovers; 18 points off turnovers. EJHS -- 16 of 62 (26%) from the floor; 2 of 22 from deep and 7 of 9 (78%) at the line; 34 rebounds (14 offensive); 24 points in the paint; 20 turnovers; 14 points off turnovers.

No. 3 Banks County 46, Union County 21 -- The Lady Panthers went scoreless for the first 9 1/2 minutes as Banks County (22-3, 8-0) grabbed a 13-0 second-quarter lead.

Union finished the game at 19% from the floor, but neither squad shot particularly well as Banks County finished at 27% overall and 18% from downtown.

"We needed to do a better job limiting their second chances, and if our shots are fall-

ing, it's a different ball game," Cochran said. "And if we see them again, we just have to relax and play better basketball, and if it's a close game, the pressure is on them as the region's only undefeated team."

Turner's jumper with 6:25 left in the second put Union on the board, but the Leopards extended its margin to 25-4 at the break following another basket by Turner at the 4:20 mark.

McCarter scored five in the third frame, Hill added 2 points and Brown hit one free throw as Banks County put the game away at 40-12 entering the fourth.

McCarter scored all of her team-high 11 points after halftime, Turner finished with 4 points, and seniors Hill and Ivie Chapman added two apiece. Hill led Union with seven rebounds and three assists. Robertson chipped in a team-high three steals and two blocks.

Despite their offensive woes, the Lady Panthers executed a solid defensive gameplan on 6-foot-1 senior Kamryn Grier, holding the preseason All-State center to 10 points on 3-for-12 shooting.

Team stats: Union -- 8 for 43 (19%) from the floor; 3 of 16 (19%) from deep and 2 of 6 (33%) at the line; 29 rebounds (13 offensive); 6 points in the paint; 9 second-chance points; 19 turnovers; 3 points off turnovers. Banks -- 14 of 52 (27%) from the floor; 2 of 11 (18%) from deep and 16 of 20 (80%) at the line; 42 rebounds (21 offensive); 20 points in the paint; 15 second-chance points; 10 turnovers; 16 points off turnovers.

Up next: The Lady Panthers host Fellowship Christian in the regular season finale on Tuesday. Tip off is at 6 p.m.

"Something we've discussed all year is not overlooking our opponent," Cochran said. "But if we don't let our defense create our offense, it's going to be a game where Fellowship hangs around."

UCHS will recognize its 1995 State Runner-Up baseball team and 1955 Region Champion / Elite Eight basketball team during halftime of the girls' game.

Basketball: 8th grade Tropics take first at Fannin County Christmas tourney; Lady Panthers 8th grade finishes second

The local Tropics 8th grade basketball team became back-to-back Fannin Christmas Tournament champions and the Union County 8th grade Lady Panthers took home second place.

Santa brought a few more Christmas surprises to Union County this year. Our local Tropics 8th grade boys' team brought home the Christmas trophy with a finals win over Pickens County. Meanwhile, the Union County 8th grade Lady Panthers were able to take 2nd place in a back-and-forth championship battle against Gilmer County.

Both teams represented our hometown well as they fought hard against many counties from north Georgia and the greater-Atlanta area for three days of competition in order to reach the televised finals of their respective divisions.

The Tropics are made of



The 8th grade Tropics local basketball team repeated as Fannin County Christmas Clash champions.

8th-graders from Union, Towns and Fannin counties and Andrews, North Carolina. This is their second year competing in the tournament and are now 8-0 with back-to-back Christmas Clash titles.

In January, these athletes

returned to their middle school teams to compete for the league title. The Christmas Clash is the first tournament of the Tropics' season as they will compete throughout the southeast during the spring and summer. Both teams would like to express their

gratitude for the community as many locals attended the tournament and also assisted them with fund-raising efforts.

Congratulations to the Tropics and Lady Panthers, we wish you nothing but the best in the future.

Mountain Gymnastics earns three golds at Winter Warm-Up

Dahlonega - Shaylyne Davis, Addison Harkins and Emma Schuette finished first at the Winter Warm-Up meet in Lumpkin County on Nov. 19-20.

Davis received a 36.1 all-around score with first-place finishes on the bars, beam and floor in USA Level 4 competition.

Harkins took home gold with a 34.45 all-around total in Level 4, placing first on the beam and second on the bars.

In Platinum competition, Schuette swept all four events (vault, bars, beam and floor) and the all-around total, resulting in a final tally of 37.0.

Kylee Coggins placed third in Gold competition, finishing first on the beam.

Leading the way in AAU Level II action was Austen Garrett's runner-up finish. Garrett placed first on the vault and third on the bars.

Lucie Burgess picked up a pair of top-three finishes on the vault and the floor during a fourth-place all-around performance (35.2) in AAU Silver.

Ellenore Perrone placed



AAU Level II



AAU Silver

fifth overall in the silver division behind a third-place score on the floor.

Meanwhile, Madelyn Primeaux and Baylor Sullivan



USA Level 4



USA Gold (Reagan Gwynn not pictured)

each finished sixth all-around in silver competition.

Other Level II gymnasts competing in Dahlonega were Sophia Beaver (seventh

all-around), Lorelei Whitney (eighth), Hope Wright (eighth), Aria Beaudoin, (ninth) Mattie Kate Alexander (10th) and Camilla Duello (10th).