

Sports

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Wrestling: Union County sending eight to State Championships

Phillips, Agacinski and Kennedy enter this weekend's tournament as No. 1 seeds

By Todd Forrest
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Hazelhurst - Senior Sean Phillips (170 lbs.) placed first at the Class AA Sectionals tournament to headline a weekend that saw Union County wrestling qualify eight competitors for the Class AA State Championships.

On the girls' side, Union County junior Shelby Agacinski (152) and sophomore Brooke Kennedy (197) also took home first at last weekend's sectionals tournament and will compete for a Class AA/A State title this weekend.

Senior Brady Guild (160) placed second while sophomore Zander Rotko (132), freshman Asa Smith-Foot (138) and freshman Payton Legatt (145) each finished fifth. With the top-six moving on from each weight class, senior Landon Clark earned a berth at state with a sixth-place finish at 120 lbs.

Phillips' weekend began with a 70-second pinfall over Putnam County junior Scotty Ford. Berrien County's Matthew Lopez offered Phillips his toughest challenge of the day during the second round, where the Union County senior survived a 2-1 decision to advance to the semifinals.

Phillips reached the finals via a 55-second pinfall of Pace Academy senior Jude Black. In the title bout, Phillips scored a 10-6 decision over Lovett senior Finn Bresnahan.

In the 160 finals, Fannin County's defending State runner-up, Corbin Davenport, recorded a third-round pin over Guild after the Union County

Union County qualifies 11 wrestlers for State Sectionals; Guild and Phillips take home gold

By Todd Forrest
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Blue Ridge - Union County qualified a program-record 11 wrestlers to the Class AA State Sectionals during the Area 8 Championships in Blue Ridge last Monday, Jan. 31.

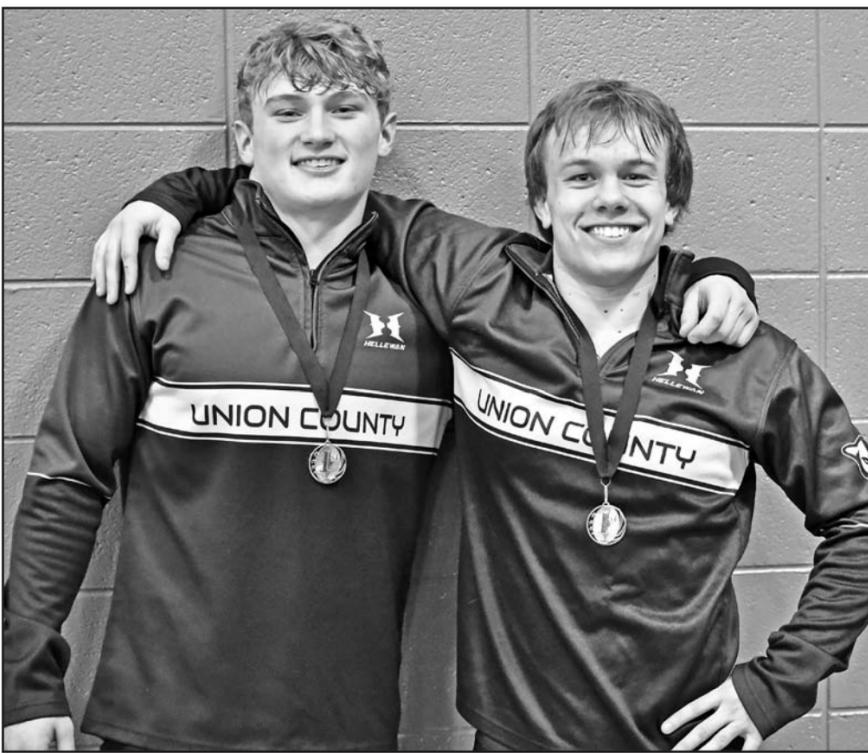
A pair of Area Championships highlighted the Panthers' evening courtesy of seniors Brady Guild (160 lbs.) and Sean Phillips (170). Additionally, four Union wrestlers finished as Area runner-up: Senior Landon Clark (120), freshman Asa Smith-Foot (138), freshman Payton Legatt (145) and junior Huck Whisenhunt (182).

Sophomores Zander Rotko (132) and Lane Lance (220) placed third. Senior Kanon Abercrombie (126), freshman Ayden Lee (152) and junior Wilson Walker (195) each finished fourth. Freshman heavyweight Caleb Lance earned a sectionals' alternate spot by coming in fifth.

"I thought we did pretty good, but we came in with kind of a weird situation," Union wrestling coach Justin Byers said. "We had to postpone [the Area tournament] once, then we had to postpone again and that can make it difficult for the guys to maintain their weight."

"We came in kind of cold, but to leave with two Area Championships, both seniors who have worked really, really hard, it was a huge night for the program."

In the 160 title bout, Guild scored a pinfall over the defend-



L-R: UCHS seniors Brady Guild (160 lbs.) and Sean Phillips (170) after winning gold at the Area 8 Championships last Monday, Jan. 31 in Blue Ridge. The duo would go on to place second and first, respectively, at the Class AA State Sectionals last weekend at Jeff Davis High School. Photo/Todd Forrest

senior pinned Davenport during the Area finals earlier in the week.

Agacinski earned a top seed in the girls' State Championships by defeating Putnam County's Cherish Rowell (forfeit) in the semis and pinning Fannin's Chelsey Frye in the 152 title bout.

Kennedy took care of business at 197, defeating Northeast Macon's Jayla Johnson by forfeit before needing just 54 seconds to pin Lanier County's Raychel Caldwell in the finals.

Guild opened the sectional tournament with a 57-second pin over Berrien

County senior Jacob Voyles defeated Clark in the 120 finals after Fannin's Cooper Moreland was pinned by Clark in the semis. At 138, Fannin junior Taylor Collis needed overtime to edge Smith-Foot in an intense four-round battle.

Smith-Foot reached the finals with a pinfall victory over Banks' Jaxon Mitchell.

"Our fans tonight were awesome," Byers said. "It was really awesome to see some new faces from Union County that made the trip to support us."

Legatt pinned Banks' Aucy Jacobs in the semifinals but dropped an 8-4 decision to Fannin County junior Drake Cantrell in the 145 finals. Banks County sophomore Christian Lee pinned Whisenhunt at 182. Whisenhunt reached the finals by way of a pinfall victory over Rabun's Evan Hooper.

In the consolation finals, Rotko pinned Rabun County freshman Rodolfo Ramos at 132 lbs. following a consolation win over RMA's Caleb Baker. Earlier in the day, Banks' Danny Evans recorded a pinfall over Rotko in the semifinal round.

Lance pinned Riverside Military Academy (RMA) junior Zach Miller at 220 after falling to Miller via pinfall during the opening round.

RMA sophomore Armand La Douceur pinned Abercrombie in the 126 consols and Fannin junior Tristan Siler pinned Lee at 152. Rabun sophomore Justin Cody pinned Walker in the 195 consolation finals. Rabun junior Elijah Bryner pinned Smith in the heavyweight consolation semifinals.

The Panthers continued building momentum for the future, topping last year's program-defining performance when Union County won its first Area Championship (heavyweight Eli Smith-Foot) and qualified a then-school record 10 wrestlers for the 2021 State Sectionals.

"We're heading in the right direction, we've placed at every tournament this year and I'm very pleased with how we did today," Byers said.

Union finished third in the team standings behind first-place Banks County and runner-up Fannin County. Rabun County came in fourth and RMA placed fifth.

Shelby Agacinski and Brooke Kennedy did not compete at Area after receiving an automatic berth into the girls' State Sectionals tourney.

"Now we get a couple days of practice then we turn around and take a six-hour bus ride to Jeff Davis for Sectionals," Byers added. "I have to thank the administration and the board for everything they do for us."



Junior Huck Whisenhunt during his Area semifinals' victory over Rabun County. Photo/Todd Forrest

After a first-round bye, Clark lost an 8-2 decision to the eventual runner-up, Jeff Davis' Gavin Coleman. Clark secured his spot at the State Championships via an 11-8 decision over Putnam County's Wyatt Stanley. Clark would go on to drop the fifth-place match to a familiar face in Fannin County's Cooper Moreland, who he defeated in the Area semis.

Senior Kanon Abercrombie fell to another Area opponent, coming up one round short of qualifying for State when he lost to Riverside's Armand La Douceur at 126. Sophomore Lane Lance (220) also came one round short of continuing his season after earning a bye to begin the consols.

Juniors Huck Whisenhunt (182) and Wilson Walker (195), along with freshman Ayden Lee (152), all finished two rounds short of a state-

qualifying top-six finish.

The Class AA State Championships get underway at 8 a.m. Friday morning at the Macon Centreplex. The finals and consolation finals are expected to start at 10 a.m. Saturday.

In Friday's opening round, Clark will face Pepperell sophomore Cory Moten at 120 lbs. Rotko will meet Callaway's Isaiah Shewmake at 132 and Smith-Foot will square off with Dade County sophomore Brandon Willerson at 138. In the 145 division, Legatt meets Bremen sophomore James Bumgardner.

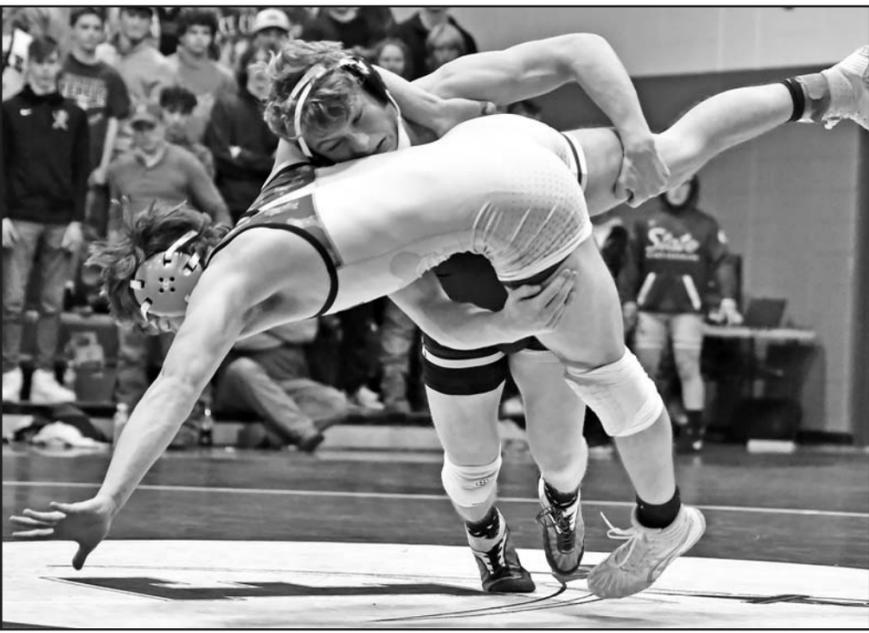
Guild earned a first-round bye at 160 and will await the winner of Banks County's Roman Haynes and Elbert County's Matt Smith. As for Phillips, the top-seed also received a bye and will face the winner of Banks County's Cam Cooper and Vidalia's Ronald Pointer in round two.



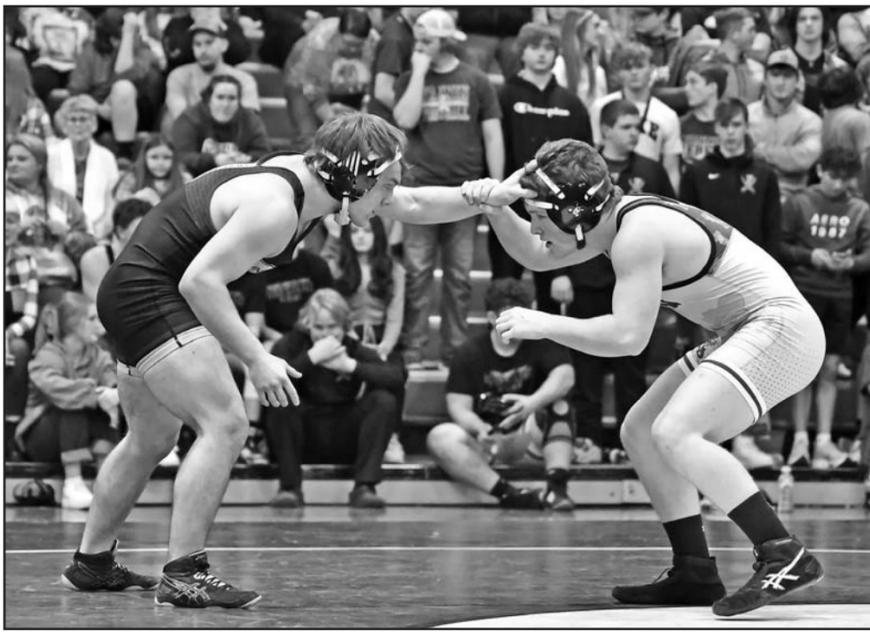
Freshman Asa Smith-Foot takes control vs. Banks County in the 138-lb. semifinals. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County wrestling poses for a team picture after the Area 8 Championships. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Brady Guild goes for a takedown during his Area 8 title match victory over Fannin County's Corbin Davenport. Both Guild and Davenport are two of the favorites in Class AA at 160 lbs. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Sean Phillips (L) and Fannin County's Colby Shaw (R) clash in front of a packed house at the old Fannin County High School gymnasium during the 170-lb. Area title match. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers remain in driver's seat for No. 3 seed in Region 8-AA

Union hangs on vs. Banks County, struggles late in loss at Elbert County

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The Union County men (9-12, 2-4) picked up a critical Region 8-AA victory over Banks County, rallying from 12 down, then holding off the Leopards down the stretch in a Tuesday-night home court thriller.

Later in the week, the Panthers went ice cold in the fourth quarter, eventually falling short during a 54-51 loss at Elbert County where Union missed a pair of potential game-tying 3-pointers in the final 11 seconds.

The loss to Elbert County eliminates the Panthers from the No. 2 seed in next week's Region 8-AA tournament. However, Union can still clinch the No. 3 seed outright with home wins over last-place Riverside and Elbert County. By finishing third, the Panthers decrease their odds of facing eighth-ranked Rabun County in Tiger to open the post-season.

Even with a split this week, Union County can still finish tied for third by defeating RMA on Tuesday and losing to Elbert on Thursday, should Banks County drop its season-finale visit to Rabun County. If the chips fall in that order with Union and Banks tied, a coin toss would determine third and fourth in the region tournament.

Panthers 60, Banks County 55 - In a similar fashion as last month's visit to Homer, Union County fell into a 12-point hole during the first quarter, only to storm back and regain the lead in the second. But this time, the Panthers held on down the stretch courtesy of 47 combined points from seniors Landon Kight (24) and Austin Taylor (23).

"We knew we had to stay focused and keep executing," said Taylor when asked about his team's mindset after falling behind 15-3 during the opening minutes. "We've been in that situation before, so it wasn't anything new for us. We knew what we had to do."

Spurred on by an electric home crowd, Union County found itself clinging to a 50-48 lead just beyond the midway point of the fourth when senior Lake Hughes broke a string of four-straight misses from long distance to furnish the Panthers a 5-point advantage. Taylor stretched the margin to 54-48 with a 1-for-2 trip to the line at the 2:37 mark, but Banks answered with a trey



Sharpshooting senior Austin Taylor brings the Panthers' bench to its feet while helping to end an eight-game skid vs. Banks. Photo/Todd Forrest

15 seconds later to keep it a one-possession game. Shooting the bonus, the Panthers missed the front-end of a 1-and-1 on consecutive trips, while Banks County split a pair at the stripe with 53 seconds on the clock, trimming its deficit to 54-52. But moments later, Taylor briefly put an end to Union's charity-stripe woes, sinking 2 of 2 and providing his squad a 4-point cushion.

Following a Banks County miss, the Panthers failed to connect on two free throws, then they made matters worse by committing the cardinal sin of fouling a 3-point shooter with a 4-point lead. Fortunately, the Leopards shooter missed 2 of 3 at the line with 29 seconds remaining and Kight made 2 of 2 to put the finishing touches on his 24-point, 10-rebound double-double.

A Banks County dribble-drive kept the visitors within three at 58-55, but Taylor soon put the game out of reach, hitting two free throws with 9 seconds to play.

Taylor finished the contest with a career-high 23 points and two steals on 6-of-12 shooting from downtown. But according to the senior guard, sinking five-straight free throws during crunch time is what he will cherish most about the performance.

"The free throws are definitely what I'll remember most about tonight," he said. "I just want our team to win. I don't care what it takes; I want the win."

In the early going, fellow senior Landon Kight sparked the

Union comeback by accounting for 14-straight points on the heels of a trey from freshman Jude Ellis that moved the Panthers within single digits at 19-10.

During the final minute of the opening frame, Kight split a pair of free throws, then scored inside with time running out to slice the deficit to 19-13. Banks County caught a massive break as time expired, however, banking in a full-court shot from just in front of the opposite basket. Replays later showed that the 80-foot miracle came well after the horn, but as it stood, the Leopards held a 22-13 advantage after one.

But the Panthers began the second undeterred and Kight continued to have his way in the post, scoring six straight to start the period before the senior kicked out to Taylor for a game-tying trey.

Kight's final basket of the 14-point barrage came at the 4:30 mark, awarding Union its first lead at 24-22. Later in the quarter, junior Eli Underwood spelled Kight and sank two free throws, building a 26-22 lead and cap a 13-0 Panthers' run.

The Leopards stormed back in front with a 5-0 spurt, but Taylor answered with consecutive triples to spot Union a 32-29 halftime advantage.

"I wanted to give us a spark, but I came in and missed my first two shots; but then I hit three-in-a-row and was able to give us a little spark going into halftime," said Taylor, regarding his role in the Panthers' second-quarter surge.

Union cameback by accounting for 14-straight points on the heels of a trey from freshman Jude Ellis that moved the Panthers within single digits at 19-10. During the final minute of the opening frame, Kight split a pair of free throws, then scored inside with time running out to slice the deficit to 19-13. Banks County caught a massive break as time expired, however, banking in a full-court shot from just in front of the opposite basket. Replays later showed that the 80-foot miracle came well after the horn, but as it stood, the Leopards held a 22-13 advantage after one. But the Panthers began the second undeterred and Kight continued to have his way in the post, scoring six straight to start the period before the senior kicked out to Taylor for a game-tying trey. Kight's final basket of the 14-point barrage came at the 4:30 mark, awarding Union its first lead at 24-22. Later in the quarter, junior Eli Underwood spelled Kight and sank two free throws, building a 26-22 lead and cap a 13-0 Panthers' run. The Leopards stormed back in front with a 5-0 spurt, but Taylor answered with consecutive triples to spot Union a 32-29 halftime advantage. "I wanted to give us a spark, but I came in and missed my first two shots; but then I hit three-in-a-row and was able to give us a little spark going into halftime," said Taylor, regarding his role in the Panthers' second-quarter surge.



Freshman Houston Henry (14) provides defensive help as senior Caleb John strips a Leopards ball handler. Photo/Todd Forrest

Banks County raced ahead 37-34 in the early stages of a back-and-forth third frame as Hughes and freshman Houston Henry each collected their third foul.

Fortunately, Kight and Taylor were still available.

Kight sank two free throws and Taylor knocked down consecutive 3s to put Union back on top 42-39, just shy of the 3:30 mark. But Union still found itself trailing 43-42 with under 30 seconds left in the frame when Kight went back to work down low, putting his team out front at quarter's end, 44-43.

Kight started the fourth with a layup and Taylor answered two Banks County free throws with his sixth triple of the night for a 49-45 advantage. The Leopards hit 1-of-2 at the free throw line with 5:15 remaining and Kight split a pair 10 seconds later. Then, on its ensuing possession, Banks County converted a dribble-drive to pull within a deuce at 50-48.

Hughes finished with 6 points and three boards in just 21 minutes of action. Ellis had 3 points and three assists; senior Caleb John dished out a game-high six assists to go with four rebounds and 2 points. Underwood added 2 points, two rebounds and a steal. Henry dished out four assists and hauled in three rebounds.

Despite not filling up the stat sheet (one rebound in five minutes) sophomore Braylen Rader (+2 in the plus/minus metric) provided a solid defensive presence off the bench during the third quarter while foul trouble thinned the Union backcourt.

Union made 19 of 44 (43%) from the field and 9 for 27 (33%) from 3-point range. Banks hit 22

of 48 (46%) overall and 6 of 19 (32%) from deep. The Panthers sank 13 of 20 (65%) at the foul line while Banks struggled at 5 for 13 (39%).

Banks out-rebounded Union 27-22 and outscored the Panthers 28-20 in the paint. The Panthers committed just seven turnovers while Banks County turned it over 11 times.

Panthers 51, Elbert County 54 - Trailing 51-49 with just under 4 minutes to play, Ellis chased down a Hughes miss on the perimeter and found a lane to the basket where he tied the game with a right-handed scoop layup. Unfortunately, Union County would go scoreless over the final 3:50, culminating in a 54-51 loss at 8-AA's second-place Elbert County.

After Union failed to connect in the paint, the Blue Devils grabbed the lead for good on a go-ahead layup with 3:01 remaining. Both offenses exchanged turnovers but Union coughed up the basketball once again at the 1:30 mark. The defense would force a much-needed stop, but the Panthers handed possession back to Elbert when they threw the ball out-of-bounds on a pick-and-roll entry pass.

With 20 seconds on the clock, Elbert County split two free throws then held on after Union missed a pair of 3s during the final 11 seconds.

In contrast to the final four minutes, the Panthers came out of the gates red-hot, shooting 6 for 8 from long distance (7-of-12 overall) during the opening frame. Trailing 10-9 early, Union outscored Elbert 11-2 to secure its largest lead of the night at 20-12.

Still on top 21-14 entering the second, the Panthers were the victims of a 9-0 run that moved the home team back in front 23-21. Elbert would outscore Union County 7-5 the rest of the way to hold a 30-26 halftime advantage.

Looking up at a 32-26 third-quarter deficit, the Panthers stormed back into the lead at 37-35, courtesy of an 11-3 run that helped Union maintain a 40-39 edge heading into the fourth. The lead was short-lived as Elbert seized a 45-42 margin less than 45 seconds into the frame, but Ellis scored the next 5 points and Union regained the advantage, 47-45.

Ellis' five-point swing began with a 22-footer from the top of the circle, followed by two free throws with 6:21 to play. On the ensuing possession, Elbert jumped back in front, converting an and-one after scoring on a putback with 5:51 remaining. The Blue Devils eventually extended their lead to 50-47 before Kight stopped the bleeding with a jump-hook in the paint.

Later, Elbert County sank 1 of 2 at the foul line for a 51-49 score at the 4:11 mark.

Ellis led the way with a game-high 21 points on 4-of-7 shooting from long distance. The freshman grabbed four rebounds, dished out two assists and picked up two steals.

Kight notched another double-double, scoring 11 points with 12 boards. He also recorded three assists and blocked two shots.

Hughes finished with 8 points, two rebounds and two assists. Henry had 5 points, three rebounds and two assists; Taylor added 3 points, one rebound and an assist.

Underwood scored 2 points with three boards and a block. John had 1 point, four rebounds and three assists.

The Panthers finished 18 for 50 (36%) from the floor and hit 8 of 25 (32%) from deep. Elbert shot 19 for 57 (33%) overall and 3 of 14 (21%) from 3-point range. Union hit 7 of 10 (70%) at the line; Elbert made 13 of 20 (65%).

The Blue Devils out-rebounded the visitors 41-32 and controlled the paint 28-20. The Panthers turned it over 14 times to Elbert County's 11.

Up next: Union County will host Riverside Military Academy on Tuesday following the Lady Panthers' 6 p.m. non-region clash with Rabun Gap-Nacoochee. Friday's season finale with Elbert County has been rescheduled for Thursday with the girls tipping off at 4:30 p.m.

Lady Panthers rout Banks County, have no answer for No. 2 Elbert

Hunter in reach of Candace Williams' UCHS career scoring record

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The Union County Lady Panthers (12-9, 2-3) secured third-place in next week's Region 8-AA tournament with a 64-51 home victory vs. Banks County on Tuesday, Feb. 1.

However, Union's chances of overtaking second-ranked Elbert County for 8-AA's No. 2 seed were dealt a significant blow during Friday's 71-43 road loss to the Blue Devils.

Senior Ava Hunter finished with 20 points in the win over Banks but was limited to just 9 points at Elbert County, giving her 1,479 points for her career. With at least five games remaining (two regular-season games, two region tourney games and one at State), Hunter needs 122 points to match Candace Williams' UCHS scoring record of 1,601 points.

Over five contests, Hunter would need to average 24.4 points a game to match Williams. Hunter's per-game average drops to 20.3 should Union County win a state playoff game. She is currently averaging 19.2 points a game on the year.

Williams, a 2009 UCHS graduate, went on to play at the University of Georgia and is believed to be the only Panther or Lady Panther to score in the NCAA Tournament.

In the first round of the upcoming Class AA State tourney, the Lady Panthers will meet an opponent from 6-AA - a region that doesn't feature a top-10 squad. At the moment, Pace Academy (12-6 overall) and Lovett (16-7) sit atop the 6-AA standings. According to the MaxPreps power rankings, Union County has faced the third-toughest schedule among the top 30 teams in Class AA. Meanwhile, Lovett has faced the weakest schedule and Pace Academy has seen the second-weakest schedule among the top 30.

Lady Panthers 64, Banks County 51 - Union County seized control and never looked back following a 29-10 second frame that opened up a 45-22 halftime advantage.

The Lady Panthers shot 11 for 15 in the second quarter while hitting 5 of 6 from 3-point territory. Ariel McCarter posted a career-high in the first half, scor-



Ava Hunter scores two of her 1,479 career points last week. She also pulled down her 800th career rebound at Elbert. Photo/Todd Forrest

kept Union in control, eventually triggering a 9-1 run that stretched the Lady Panthers' margin to 62-42 near the 3-minute mark.

Junior Corinne Hill finished with 6 points, four rebounds and three assists. Chambers added 4 points, five rebounds and two assists. Sophomore Morgan Warren pulled down two rebounds.

Union County finished 6 of 12 (50%) from long distance and 22 for 48 (46%) overall. Banks went 18 for 53 (34%) overall and 2 for 12 (17%) from deep. The Lady Panthers made 14 of 16 (88%) at the foul line; Banks County went 13 for 20 (65%).

Rebounds were even at 31 apiece and the Leopards held a 32-30 advantage in points in the paint. Union committed 14 turnovers while Banks County gave it up 10 times.

Lady Panthers 43, No. 2 Elbert County 71 - Elbert County closed the first with a 23-6 onslaught following a brief 3-2 Union County advantage via a McCarter triple 70 seconds into the contest.

Trailing 25-9 to start the second, the Lady Panthers kept pace at 27-12 until Elbert County exploded once again, this time using a 17-6 run to mount a 44-18 halftime lead. The Blue Devils' largest lead came during the third period at 63-28, but Union County closed the quarter with a trey and



Lara Turner hits a pull-up jumper in last Tuesday's win over Banks that clinched at least third place in 8-AA for Union. Photo/Todd Forrest

split two free throws with 2:17 on the clock before closing out the Union County scoring with a trey at the 1:33 mark.

Hunter finished with 9 points and 11 rebounds; Chambers added 7 points and six boards. McCarter finished with 6 points and five rebounds while Mull chipped in 5 points.

Turner pulled down seven

rebounds to go with 4 points. Banton had 4 points and a steal; sophomore Sofia McNabb added 2 points and five boards.

Hill had 2 points and a team-high three assists. Katie Byers and Ansley Collins added 2 points each; senior Caley Davis pulled down two rebounds.

Union County shot 15 of 48 (31%) from the floor and 4 of 12 (33%) from downtown. Elbert made 29 of 69 (42%) overall and 6 of 17 (35%) from 3-point territory. The Lady Panthers sank 9 of 18 (50%) at the line; Elbert went 7 for 15 (47%).

Union out-rebounded Elbert 41-38 but the Blue Devils owned the paint by a 38-16 scoring margin. The Lady Panthers turned it over 22 times while Elbert coughed it up nine times.

Up next: Union County will host Rabun Gap at 6 p.m. Tuesday and will host Elbert County at 4:30 p.m. Thursday in a game rescheduled from Feb. 11.

The Lady Panthers could still force a tie for second with a win on Thursday combined with an Elbert loss to No. 1 Rabun. If the region plays out that way, a coin toss would determine the No. 2 seed, but Union's first-round opponent (Elbert) wouldn't change.

The Region 8-AA tournament will be hosted by the girls' No. 1 seed (Rabun or Elbert).

Byers and John voted UCHS basketball royalty



Seniors Emily Byers and Caleb John were crowned the 2022 UCHS Basketball Homecoming Queen and King ahead of last Tuesday's varsity games vs. Banks County. Additional homecoming and Senior Night photos will be included in a future edition of the North Georgia News. Photo/Todd Forrest