

Lady Panthers falter late in losses to Banks, Elbert; postseason begins Friday

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Winter weather reshuffled Union County Basketball's already-modified schedule last week, postponing two region matchups and canceling Thursday's visit to Rabun Gap.

Wednesday's night's home meeting with Banks County, initially scheduled for Tuesday, ended in a 46-38 loss after the Leopards pulled away late, doubling up Union County 14-7 in the fourth quarter.

Trailing 32-31 after three, the Lady Panthers (2-9, 0-5) could not secure their first region victory despite 16 points from junior Rebekah Chambers — matching a career-high (at Fannin County, Dec. 2020).

Leading 9-8 entering the second, Banks County raced in front 23-15 at the break, limiting Union County's leading scorer, junior Ava Hunter, to just one first-half field goal.

Chambers (6 points) and sophomore Ellie Cook (7) picked up the slack in the third frame, combining for 13 points as the Lady Panthers outscored Banks 16-7, pulling within a point.

However, one field goal each from Chambers and Hunter



Left: Ava Hunter draws a double-team vs. Banks County. Right: Panther pride runs in all age groups at UCHS sporting events. Photos/Karen Clark

accounted for Union's only fourth-quarter baskets as the Lady Panthers finished just 3-for-7 at the charity stripe over the final eight minutes.

Chambers went 7 of 9 from the floor and 2 for 2 at the line while registering four rebounds and three steals.

Cook had 11 points, five steals, four boards and sank Union's only 3 of the contest. Hunter ended her night with

6 points, 10 rebounds and a blocked shot.

Freshman Lara Turner finished with 3 points, four rebounds, two assists and two steals. Fellow freshman Kyra McKechnie rounded out the scoring with 2 points to go with one steal.

Sophomore Corinne Hill chipped in three rebounds, one dime and one steal. Junior Ansley Collins had three boards;



Right: Panther pride runs in all age groups at UCHS sporting events. Photos/Karen Clark

sophomore Kaylee Helton added two rebounds and freshman Sofia McNabb had one board.

During Friday's meeting with Elbert County, the second-ranked Lady Devils ran away from Union County with a 32-13 second half during a 60-35 victory.

Thirty-two turnovers doomed the Lady Panthers in the loss, giving Elbert County 70 takeaways in two meetings

County last month) while scoring 4 points and blocking one shot.

Cook finished with 3 points, five boards, three dimes and a steal.

The Lady Panthers went 0 for 6 from downtown vs. Elbert and 1 of 5 vs. Banks. Union has missed 27 of 29 attempts from 3-point territory over the last five games.

The Lady Panthers hit 9 of 15 (60%) from the line vs. Elbert County and 9 of 16 (56%) vs. Banks County.

Overall, Union County shot 14 of 44 (32%) vs. Banks County and 13 of 48 (27%) vs. Elbert County from the field.

Looking ahead: Saturday's regular-season finale at No. 3 Rabun County was delayed until Monday.

The girls' Region 8-AA Tournament is slated to begin on Friday at Banks County with Union facing Elbert at 7:30 p.m. The girls championship and consolation games are on Tuesday, Feb. 16 at 6 and 7:30 p.m.

Next week's State Tournament includes an 8-AA vs. 5-AA first-round matchup. Region 5-AA features a three-way battle for first between Callaway (10-6, 6-1), Heard County (15-4, 4-1) and Haralson County (15-3, 3-2).

UCHS sends a pair of swimmers to State

Atlanta - On Thursday, Feb. 4, two swimmers represented Union County High School at the GHSA State Championships at Georgia Tech.

Hannah Sheffield dropped her time in the 50-yard freestyle, coming in third place in Class AA while breaking her own UCHS record. Also, she had a personal best in the 100-yard freestyle, placing

fourth in Class AA, besting the UCHS record that she previously owned.

Hunter White dropped his time in the 50-yard freestyle, coming in fourth in Class AA.

In addition, he had a personal best time in the 100-yard breaststroke, securing a second place finish in Class AA.

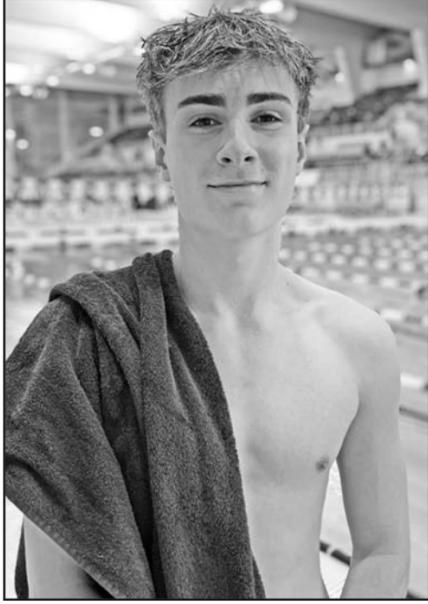
Coaches Kelly Helton and Emily Stafford, alongside

the UCHS swim team family would like to extend their thanks to the Union County Board of Education and Union General Wellness Center for their support and help during this season.

The North Georgia News congratulates all UCHS and UCMS swimmers and coaches on a remarkable 2020-21 season. The program's future is exceptionally promising.



Hannah Sheffield



Hunter White

First quarter vs. Banks, third quarter vs. Elbert dooms Union men in 8-AA losses



Junior Hayden Payne (25) draws contact in the paint during the second half vs. Banks. Photo/Karen Clark

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

The Union County men dropped to 0-10 overall following double-digit Region 8-AA losses to Banks County and Elbert County.

Saturday's regular-season finale at Rabun County was postponed until Monday.

During Friday's 49-25 home loss to Elbert County, the Panthers led 9-7 after one, extending its advantage to 15-9 before holding a narrow 16-15 edge at the break. After a slug-gish start to the third period by both squads, the Blue Devils finally seized control with a 14-3 run near the midway point of the quarter.

Down 33-19 early in the fourth, the Panthers attempted to make a run, cutting the difference to 35-25 until a 14-0 Elbert County outburst finished off the home team for good.

Junior Daniel Snow turned in career-highs with 9 points and nine rebounds in 30 minutes.

Junior Caleb John had 8 points, one assist and a steal. Ju-

nior Lake Hughes added 4 points and two boards; sophomore Eli Underwood had 2 points, three rebounds and two steals; junior Landon Kight finished with 2 points, six boards and a block.

Despite out-rebounding Elbert County 31-24, the Panthers turned it over 34 times, resulting in 19 Blue Devil points.

Union County finished 8 for 31 from the floor, going 0 for 14 from long range. The Panthers sank 9 of 17 at the line. Elbert went 5 of 12 at the charity stripe.

Meanwhile, Wednesday night's 64-45 home loss to Banks was rescheduled from Tuesday due to winter weather.

The Leopards jumped out to an 18-4 advantage and held a 29-15 halftime margin. They eventually ran away late in the third with a 10-2 run to close the period up 54-30 after Union continued hanging around at 44-28.

Hughes, Kite and John combined for 30 of the Panthers' 45 points, with Hughes scoring a team-high 11 on 3-for-8 shooting from downtown and five rebounds.

Kite added 10 points, eight

boards and two steals. John had 9 points, two assists and two steals.

Sophomore Griffin Young scored a career-high 6 points, and junior Hayden Payne had 4 points while hauling in a career-high seven rebounds. Snow chipped in 3 points and four boards; freshman Caiden Tanner had 2 points and a steal.

Up next: The Panthers will open Region 8-AA Tournament play on Saturday at Banks County. Union will face the host Leopards at 7:30 p.m.

The boys' championship and consolation games are scheduled for Wednesday, Feb. 17 at 6 and 7:30 p.m..

In next week's State Tournament, Region 8-AA will face Region 5-AA in the opening round. Like the girls, the boys champion will likely be determined by Callaway and Heard County. However, no team in 5-AA currently sports a winning record. First-place Callaway is 7-9 overall, Heard sits at 9-13 and third-place Temple is 10-10. Fourth-place Bremen is 1-16 and last-place Haralson County is 5-14.

NASCAR 2021

By Gerald Hodges/the Racing Reporter

Harvick To Start His 20th Daytona 500

The 63rd running of the Daytona 500 on Feb. 14 at Daytona marks a milestone in Kevin Harvick's career. It will be his 20th career start in the Great American Race, with his first Daytona 500 coming on Feb. 17, 2002. He started second in that race and finished 36th after getting collected in a multicaer accident on lap 150.

He is coming off a career best, nine win season, and has to be considered one of the favorites to win this year's race.

"You've got to start over just because of the fact you just never know how things are going to shake out, how your cars are going to run, and the decisions you're going to make," he said. "You just have to start over and forget everything that you've done, and I think that's one thing we do really well as a team. Whether it's a really good week or a really bad week, or a good season or a bad season, we're really good at just forgetting about whatever it is that happened and making sure that we're focused on the things we need to be focused on for that particular week."

Five years and one day after his Daytona 500 debut, Harvick won the 2007 Daytona 500. He edged NASCAR Hall of Famer Mark Martin for the victory by .02 of a second in a frantic green-white-checked finish.

To earn a spot in the Daytona 500, drivers must first compete in the Duel, twin 150-mile qualifying races that set the 40-car field for the Daytona 500. Harvick has won his Duel race twice (2013 and 2019). He is currently on a run of five straight top-five finishes in the Duel, and he has finished among the top-10 in 11 of his last 13 Duel races.

Before drivers compete in the Duel, they race the clock in single-lap qualifying. The two fastest cars are locked into the field while the rest of the drivers are split into the Duel. Odd-numbered drivers are in the first Duel and even-numbered drivers are in the second Duel. Harvick has never started on the pole for the Daytona 500, but he did take the outside pole once in 2002 for his first Daytona 500.

For a select group of drivers, 24 to be exact, a non-points exhibition race around the Daytona road course kicks off their week at Daytona. The Busch Clash is comprised of Busch Pole winners from last season, past Busch Clash winners who competed full-time in 2020, Daytona 500 winners who competed full-time in 2020, former Daytona 500 Busch Pole winners who competed full-time in 2020, as well as any NASCAR Cup Series drivers who made the playoffs in 2020, won a race in 2020 or won a stage in 2020. Harvick checks all of these boxes. In fact, he is a three-time winner of the Busch Clash (2009, 2010, and 2013). However, all of those wins came on Daytona's 2.5-mile oval. This is the first Busch Clash on the 14-turn, 3.61-mile road course.

The Busch Clash will mark Harvick's second NASCAR Cup series race on the Daytona road course, but his third overall. The Cup Series raced on the Daytona road course for the first time last August. Harvick started from the pole and ran among the top-10 until two separate spins in the final stage relegated him to a 17th-place finish. Prior to that race, Harvick's lone appearance on the Daytona road course came in 2002 during the Rolex 24 at Daytona sports-car race, where his team finished eighth in class and 69th overall.

The 2021 season marks his 21st year in the NASCAR Cup Series. He has 718 career, point-paying starts, with 39 of them coming on Daytona's 2.5-mile oval. In addition to his 2017 Day-



Kevin Harvick 2020

tona 500 victory, Harvick won the 2010 Coke Zero 400. He has 10 top-fives and 15 top-10s on the Daytona oval.

Outside of the NASCAR Cup Series, Harvick has made 19 career NASCAR Xfinity Series starts at Daytona and three IROC starts. Of his 47 Xfinity Series wins, only one is at Daytona, the 2007 season opener. And Harvick's best IROC finish at Daytona is seventh, earned twice (2003 and 2004). Harvick is a two-time Xfinity Series champion (2001 and 2006) and the 2002 IROC champion.

"As a group, we want to win," he continued. "I would rather win races than win a championship at this point. In order to keep the attitude and enthusiasm where it needs to be, we need to be competitive week in and week out. If it works out in a championship at the end of the year, ultimately that's the goal, but the immediate goal when you start the season is how competitive are we from week one to week 36, and how do we put ourselves in a position to win as many races as possible. If you do that, you're going to have a chance to win races, and not only win, you're going to have a chance to make the playoffs, progress through the playoffs, and win the championship. With the playoff format, it really just is what it is. You go, you race, and you see where it falls. For us as a team, it's more important for us to be competitive week in and week out. Win as many races as we can and see where that takes us in the end."

Other Racing News: Kurt Busch has been a model of consistency since joining the Chip Ganassi team in 2019 but will be looking to make a deeper playoff push this year, as many speculate this may be his final full year in the Cup Series with his contract ending at the end of the season. In the 2020 Round of 12, he silenced retirement chatter with an electrifying hometown victory at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. He has made it clear that there is a lot left in the tank, expect him to bring the same energy in 2021.

Ross Chastain will be Busch's teammate at Chip Ganassi Racing. Combining the elder Busch's two decades of veteran experience with the driving ability of Chastain should make CGR an exciting team to watch in 2021. Based on recent history, Busch is almost a lock to make another playoff appearance in his 21st full-time season. The challenge will be bringing Chastain's No. 42 team back to race-winning form after last year's shakeup.

As we head into the 2021 Cup Series season, Brad Keselowski is once again expected to be a championship front-runner. The 2012 series champion has

won a race every year since 2011, the second longest active streak. Additionally, he has three or more wins in all but two of those seasons and double-digit top-five results in all but one.

Joe Gibbs Racing (JGR) announced that it has extended agreements with driver Denny Hamlin and long-time sponsor FedEx with a pair of multi-year agreements.

Hamlin is a three-time winner and defending champion of the Daytona 500. He has 44 career wins in the NASCAR Cup Series and the Chesterfield, VA native has been a model of consistency amassing 280 top-ten and 179 top-five finishes in 542 career starts. Nobody has visited victory lane more than Hamlin over the past two seasons, with his 13 wins in the Cup Series tied for the most over that time.

Racing Joke: Kyle and his wife celebrated their anniversary by visiting the Grand Canyon during the off season. They planned to each ride a pack mule to the bottom of the canyon.

They hadn't gone too far when his wife's mule stumbled. His wife quietly said, "That's once."

They proceeded a little further and her mule stumbled again. "That's twice," she said.

After going a short distance, the wife's mule stumbled a third time. His wife quietly removed a revolver from her purse and shot the mule graveyard dead.

Kyle started to protest over her treatment of the mule.

She looked at him and said, "That's once."

Weekend Racing: All racing this weekend will be at Daytona. Races will be on the 2.5-mile Daytona Speedway track, as well as the 3.61-mile road course.

Tues., Feb. 9; The Clash (Exhibition Race); Time: 7 PM; Network: FoxSports1.

Thurs., Feb. 11; Duel at Daytona (Qualifying races) Time: 7 PM; Network: FoxSports1.

Fri., Feb. 12; Truck Series Race 1; Time: 7:30 PM; Network: FoxSports1.

Sat., Feb. 13; Xfinity Series Race 1; Time: 5 PM; Network: FoxSports1.

Sun., Feb. 14; Cup Series Daytona 500; Time: 2:30 pm; Network: Fox. All times are Eastern.

Racing Question: Who won the first Daytona 500?

Last Week's Question: Which driver holds the record for most NASCAR Cup Series wins? Answer: Richard Petty's 200 wins tops the list.

Gerald Hodges/the Racing Reporter is a syndicated NASCAR writer and author. You may e-mail him at: hodges@race500.com.