

# Sports

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## Lady Panthers to face Banks for Region 8-AA title

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Following its region semifinal upset of sixth-ranked Putnam County on Friday, the 10th ranked Union County Lady Panthers are back in the Region 8-AA Championship Game for the first time in four years, looking to claim their first region crown since 2009.

However, a mean one-two punch of flooding and snow twice postponed the tournament, pushing the title-game vs Banks County (who upset top-seeded Rabun County) to Monday night. Unfortunately, results were unavailable as of the Monday deadline.

As for Union County's first-round opponent in this weekend's Class AA State Tournament, if the Lady Panthers win the region title, they will host Therrell - the 4-seed from Region 6-AA with a 10-10 record. Should Union lose to Banks on Monday night, they would host the 3-seed, South Atlanta (16-11), who Union County defeated in football and softball during the fall.

Times and dates of those contests will be posted to social media (my personal Twitter and Facebook accounts) as soon as they're finalized.

Union's journey to the region finals began last Tuesday when they dismantled Social Circle, 53-23 at home in the opening round.

The win secured Union County's first State playoff berth since 2016, ending three years of frustration for the senior trio of Brooke Dockrey, Andelin Hill and Kait McCarter.

"I think we were all just tired of losing our first game (of the region playoffs)," Dockrey said following Tuesday's win. "We just had it set in our minds this season that we were going to win."

According to Hill, reaching State is just another goal on a long list of priorities they've been focused on since a disappointing end to last season.

"We set our goals at the very beginning and we're still capable of achieving them all," she said.

Thursday's semifinal action was postponed due to flooding so the Lady Panthers had to wait until Friday for another shot at Putnam County.

After dropping both of its regular season contests to the War Eagles, Union County jumped out to a double-digit lead in the first half, eventually extending its advantage to 21 in the third before holding off a furious Putnam rally down the stretch.

With the win, the Lady Panthers have now reached 20 wins for the first time since 2008 -- their final season under head coach Mike West, who passed away that summer.

**Lady Panthers 59, Putnam County 51** - Coming off a loss to Rabun County in 8-AA's de facto regular season title game, Putnam County suffered back-to-back losses for the first time all year following Union County's 59-51 victory over the sixth-ranked War Eagles.

Playing its first game in six days, Putnam struggled out of the gates as the red-hot Lady Panthers took advantage of some early miscues to build a 31-18 halftime lead.

The War Eagles had no answer for a Union County offense that featured a steady dose of Ava Hunter, while



L-R: Union County sophomore Ava Hunter scored 25 points during Union County's semifinal victory over sixth-ranked Putnam County. Senior Brooke Dockrey finished with 11 points, including four free throws during the final 2:27 to help protect the lead. Photo/Todd Forrest

the Union lead to 52-40 at the two-minute mark.

Hunter finished with 25 points to lead the way, Dockrey added 11, Hill scored nine and Ellie Cook had eight.

"Putnam is a phenomenal squad and they're going to be a force at State," Union coach Crystal Beach said. "But like I've said before, we have focused on four quarters of consistent play, intensity and effort, and that's exactly what we went out there and did."

The Lady Panthers opened the third quarter with eight-unanswered points to build a 39-18 advantage, just shy of the three-minute mark of the period.

Cook sparked the run with a triple, Dockrey drove coast-to-coast for a layup and Hunter scored on a putback then hit 1-of-2 at the stripe to open up a 21-point lead with 3:28 left in the third.

The War Eagles responded with six-straight before a 15-footer by Hunter pushed the margin back to 17 at 41-24. Putnam closed the quarter with a trey to enter the fourth on a 9-2 run that trimmed the deficit to 41-27.

A short jumper from Hunter started the final frame on a high note before the War Eagles pulled within a dozen at 43-31 at the six-minute mark.

Hunter answered again with a floater over the baseline but back-to-back triples by Putnam cut the margin to single digits for the first time since it was 27-18 in the first half.

Clinging to a 45-37 advantage with under five minutes left, a dribble drive by Dockrey resulted in a basket plus the foul. The free throw was off but Hill secured the board and Cook drew a foul moments later. The freshman hit 1-of-2, extending the lead to 48-37.

The 11-point advantage was short-lived as Union was tagged with an over-the-back foul on Cook's missed free throw, sending Putnam to the line. After splitting the pair, Putnam forced a turnover that led to a deuce on the other end to stay within eight.

With her team clinging to a 48-40 lead, Dockrey delivered two clutch free throws with 2:27 remaining. The War Eagles would miss a pair on their end and Dockrey sank two more at the line to stretch

the Union lead to 52-40 at the two-minute mark.

But Putnam refused to go away, taking advantage of two Lady Panther turnovers that sparked a quick 6-0 spurt. Hanging on for dear life at 52-46, Union County went back to its bread-and-butter. With less than a minute remaining, Hunter scored down low to provide some breathing room via a 54-46 cushion.

Once again, just when the Lady Panthers believe they can exhale, Putnam connects with a haymaker - drilling a triple to cut the lead to five, then forcing another Union turnover with full court pressure.

Down 54-49, Putnam County had a chance to pull within three when its star player, Jashanti Simmons stepped to the line for two shots with 36 seconds on the clock.

Shockingly, Simmons missed both tries and Hunter put the game out of reach with two free throws.

"If you can slow down their best player (Simmons), they are beatable," Dockrey said when asked earlier in the week about their chances vs Putnam County. "We will also be fired up going in because we don't want to lose to them three times."

Putnam never threatened again as Hunter hit 3-of-4 down the stretch to send Union County to the Region 8-AA title game with a 59-51 victory.

"We lost a tough one when Putnam came to us, and like I told the girls, it's tough to beat a team three times, but more importantly, if we piece together a four-quarter game, we'll walk out with a win and that's exactly what we did," Beach said.

**Lady Panthers 53, Social Circle 33** - A one-sided rout of Social Circle allowed Union County to punch its ticket to the Class AA State Tournament for the first time since 2016.

The Lady Panthers led 15-2 after one as Cook scored the first six points of the game. Five different players scored for Union County in the opening quarter behind six from Cook and three each by Allison and McCarter.

The second frame began with an 8-0 Lady Panthers' run as Hunter and Hill put their stamp on the contest with 18 combined points in the period. Union County eventually took

a commanding 39-6 advantage into the break as Hunter scored 11 first-half points, Hill added 10 and Cook chipped in eight.

The reserves saw the majority of minutes in the third with Kyla Locklear and Riley Chambers breaking into the front column. Chambers and Corinne Hill accounted for Union's only points of the fourth quarter -- which was shortened to six minutes.

Hunter led all scorers with 13 while Cook and Hill poured in 10 apiece.

As freshmen, Dockrey, Hill and McCarter lost to a loaded GAC squad to end their season. The following year, they fell short to Dawson County.

Upon returning to Class AA last season, Union still couldn't shake its first-round struggles, dropping a narrow

decision to Monticello in the opening round.

This season, Union County put itself in prime position for postseason success with a 9-5 region record, setting up a first-round meeting with an overmatched opponent.

"It's an exciting feeling to finally make it because we've never made it (to State) during our first three years," Dockrey said. "But mainly, I'm just proud of us for bringing the program back to where it was (when we came in as freshmen)."

Senior Kait McCarter was relieved to have a state playoff berth locked up so they can finally put three years of late-season struggles to bed.

"It's kind of a relief because now we can just focus on trying to win the region tournament.

"I think the years we had to play (GAC and Dawson in the first round) it showed us what we were capable of. If you can compete with them, you can compete with anybody."

**Up next** - There are no common opponents between Union and its possible first-round opponents. However, South Atlanta does own a 45-37 win over Washington, who suffered a 52-33 blowout loss to Putnam County back on Dec. 7.

Meanwhile, Therrell lost 54-28 to Gainesville, who lost 57-45 to a five-win Cherokee Bluff squad that finished dead-last in Union's former region, 7-AAA.

Cherokee Bluff would suffer blowout losses at the hands of Fannin County and Lumpkin County before finishing 2-10 in region play.



Andelin Hill pulls down a rebound in the first half after scoring the first four Lady Panther points of the game vs Putnam County. The senior did a little bit of everything to help Union advance. Photo/Todd Forrest