

Sports

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Tails never fails: Panthers win tie-breaking coin toss for No. 1 seed

UCHS to host boys' Region 8-AA basketball tournament starting Wednesday

By Todd Forrest
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The Union County Panthers will host this week's Region 8-AA boys tournament as the No. 1 seed courtesy of last week's blowout win over Fellowship Christian and two lucky bounces at Banks County.

Three different outcomes all needed to break in Union's favor to leapfrog first-place Providence Christian (21-4, 8-2) for the top spot and home court advantage in the Region 8-AA tournament. First, the Panthers defended their home court in the regular-season finale, dominating Fellowship Christian 72-45 on Tuesday, Feb. 7.

After the win, Union County players, coaches and fans were glued to their phones, awaiting the outcome of 10th-ranked Providence at Banks County. With Panther Nation cheering the Leopards on from 65 miles away, Banks County (17-8, 7-3) held off a late rally when the Storm's game-tying 3-pointer bounced off the iron as time expired.

Twelve hours later, Union County head coach Corey Garrett attended the Region 8-AA meeting in Homer, where the tie-breaking coin toss took place between the Panthers and Storm.

And for the second straight day, fate was on Union's side in Banks County.

"On the way down [to Banks County for the coin toss], I had a lot of time to think about what I was going to call and whether or not I was going to call it or let Providence call it," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "I decided that I was going to go in there and call tails and that's pretty much what I did. So I go in and they said, 'we've got to do the coin toss, how do you want to do it?' I said, 'grab a coin and toss it, but I call tails.'

"Then they went back and forth about [designating] one team heads and one team



Maddox Young scored a career-high 15 vs. FCS. Photo/Todd Forrest

tails. I said, 'that's fine with me, just put Union down as tails.' So that's what they did, and then they flipped it and it landed on tails."

For the first time since the 1970s, the Panthers can claim a regular-season region title, and now, Union County will host fourth-seeded Athens Academy on Wednesday, Feb. 15 at 7:30 p.m.

"I think we're ready," Garrett said on Monday morning. "The guys are definitely excited, we just need to put the finishing touches on a few things these next two days. We didn't know who we would play until Saturday but we had an idea. This week, we're going to dive in pretty deep putting together a gameplan [for Athens Academy] and just get to work."

The Panthers-Spartans contest will follow the 6 p.m. matchup between second-seeded Providence and third-seeded Banks County.

The Region 8-AA Championship and the third-place game will be Friday, Feb. 17, at Union County High School.

"We expect to play in

front of a huge crowd this week," Garrett said. "I hope everyone can make it to the Wednesday night game. I know playing on Wednesday is a little different, but hopefully everyone can come out and support us."

Panthers 72, Fellowship Christian 45 - Union County (17-8, 8-2) overcame an early-game injury to Houston Henry and outscored the Paladins 20-9 in the second quarter to match the program's best win total since 2011.

Henry took a knee to the head during the game's opening minute and didn't return. Fortunately, the sophomore point guard was back at practice last week and should be 100% for the postseason.

Senior Eli Underwood scored 19 points and pulled down 20 boards during his 14th double-double of the season.

Sophomore Hayden Hughes had 18 points on 6 of 14 from long range, and sophomore Maddox Young added career highs of 15 points and seven assists. Freshman Cade Dockrey ended the night with 11 points, four assists and three



Eli Underwood's 14th double-double came vs FCS. Photo/Todd Forrest

steals.

"Cade came in [when Henry went out] and did a good job," Garrett said. "It wasn't our cleanest game offensively, but we were effective enough to get the win."

Trailing 4-2 early, Union County seized the lead for good with a 7-0 run en route to an 18-12 advantage after one. After an Ellis trey to begin the second, Young scored five straight to build a 26-15 advantage.

Hughes closed the half with two 3s in the final minute to turn an 11-point lead into a 38-21 blowout.

Dockrey, Underwood and Ellis accounted for six straight to start the third, capping a 12-0 stretch with a 44-21 lead. Dockrey, Underwood and Young extended the margin to 53-27 before Fellowship briefly moved within 20 at 53-34 with 24 seconds left. But Dockrey quickly nudged the Panthers back up 55-34 at the quarter's end with a tip-in at the buzzer.

Underwood, Young and Hughes kept Union County on top 61-40 near the 5-minute mark, then triples from Young and Hughes pushed the margin

to 67-45 with 2:58 remaining.

Ellis finished with 7 points and five rebounds. Sophomore Braden Plott scored 2 points; junior Anderson Cruise added a rebound and a steal. Union County ended with a season-high 20 made free throws, one game removed from making a season-best 86% from the line at East Jackson. Sophomore Kaden Combs pulled down two boards, and sophomore Brayden Hogsed grabbed one rebound.

Bowen Hudson led Fellowship with 15 points.

Game stats: Union -- 22 for 56 (39%) from the floor; 20 for 24 (83%) at the line and 8 for 25 (32%) from three; 41 rebounds (11 offensive); 28 points in the paint; 15 second-chance points; 9 turnovers; 17 points off turnovers. FCS -- 15 for 58 (26%) shooting; 5 for 17 (29%) from three and 8 for 15 (53%) at the line; 38 rebounds (14 offensive); 18 points in the paint; 9 second-chance points; 14 turnovers; 8 points off turnovers.

Up next: Union County hosts Athens Academy in the opening round of the region tournament on Wednesday at

7:30 p.m. The Spartans clinched a spot in the semifinals with a 79-74 win over East Jackson on Saturday's play-in game. Later that day, Banks County earned a semifinal date with Providence via a 63-40 victory over Fellowship.

With a Union win vs. Athens Academy, the Panthers would reach consecutive region title games for the first time since 2000 and 2001. Union County would also host the first round of state with a victory on Wednesday.

The Panthers are looking for their third win over Athens Academy after defeating the Spartans 68-50 in Athens on Jan. 6 and 78-63 in Blairsville on Jan. 27. Wednesday's clash also marks the sixth meeting in 13 months between Garrett and coach Don Hurlburt, who previously coached at Elbert County before taking over the Spartans.

The winner will face the Banks County-Providence winner on Friday at 7:30. The two losers will meet at 6 p.m. in the consolation game.

Region 8-AA is paired with Region 7-AA in the first round of next week's state tournament. Model (18-4, 10-2) and North Murray (21-2, 10-2) finished tied atop the region standings, with Murray County (10-12, 8-4) and Rockmart (14-12, 7-5) in third and fourth, respectively. Haralson County (12-13, 4-8), Gordon Central (10-13, 3-9) and Fannin County (2-22, 0-12) round out the bottom of the region.

Regular-season stat leaders: PTS - Underwood 13.8, Ellis 13.4, Hughes 11.1, Henry 10.9; REB - Underwood 12.3, Henry 4.8, Hughes 3.9; AST - Henry 5.0, Ellis 2.9, Young 2.0; STL - Henry 2.0, Ellis 1.1, Young 1.1; BLK - Dockrey and Henry 0.3, Ellis 0.2; FG% - Underwood 52%, Dockrey 44%, Young and Henry 39%; 3PT% - Hughes 41%, Henry 30%, Ellis 27%; FT% - Ellis 75%, Henry 74%, Underwood 66%.

Soccer: Union County sweeps Pickens at home, splits at Lumpkin County

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The Union County men's team picked up two shutout victories last week over Pickens and Lumpkin County following a 7-3 loss at Class AAA Coahulla Creek on Feb. 3.

The Lady Panthers picked up a 2-0 home victory vs. Pickens on Tuesday, Feb. 7, followed by Friday's 3-0 loss at Lumpkin County.

During the 2-0 win over Pickens, Italia Salazar accounted for both Union County goals as the Lady Panthers pulled away from a scoreless contest at the half. Salazar put Union on top 1-0 via a penalty kick, followed by a goal later in the second half.

At Lumpkin County on Friday, the Lady Panthers trailed 1-0 at the intermission, surrendering a goal in the 13th minute. The Indians made it a 2-0 game 30 seconds into the second half, then tacked on another goal in the 74th minute.

The Union County men's team held on at Lumpkin County when an unassisted first-half goal from junior newcomer Evan Bohms proved the difference during the 26th minute.

The Indians denied multiple Union scoring op-



Junior goalkeeper Kyra McKechnie denies a Lumpkin penalty kick during the second half. Photo/Todd Forrest

portunities during the second half to remain within a goal, and Panthers' senior Isaiah Ortiz turned away Lumpkin County's 1-on-1 chance in the 66th minute.

After an Indians' corner kick sailed high in the 69th minute, Union County failed

to convert a corner kick in the 72nd, missing on two headers from point-blank range. With time running out, Lumpkin County misfired on its final two shots, with one kick sailing high in the 76th minute and their last attempt drifting wide in the 79th.

Earlier in the week, the Panthers dismantled Pickens 7-0 behind five Wilson Walker goals.

Union out-shot Pickens 28-2 on the night, and got on the board via a Walker feed to Benton Gregory in the 9th minute. Union scored on a



Junior Evan Bohms celebrates his first goal as a Panther during the 26th minute at Lumpkin County - a point that proved the difference in Union County's 1-0 road shutout on Friday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

Walker header in the 16th off an Ortiz assist, then added a Pickens own goal in the 17th.

Walker converted a 1-on-1 courtesy of Antonio Solario in the 26th to cap off the first-half scoring. Walker scored three second half goals, Bohms added two assists and

Zuriel Mancillas had one.

Up next: Union County hosts Dawson County on Friday, Feb. 17. The girls will get underway at 6 p.m. with the boys to follow. Meanwhile, Union County's Tuesday, Feb. 14 trip to Gilmer has been canceled.

Wrestling: Six Panthers advance; Legatt and Heredia first at sectionals

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Eatonton - Union County qualified six individuals for this weekend's Class AA State Championships in Macon, headlined by Junior David Heredia and sophomore Payton Legatt's first-place finishes during last Saturday's State sectionals tournament at Putnam County High School.

Union County senior Huck Whisenhunt, juniors Anderson Clouse and Zander Rotko, and sophomore Asa Smith-Foot also advanced to Macon with top-six sectional performances.

Legatt came in first at 157 lbs courtesy of a first-round pin over Westside-Augusta's Jeanarion Kamga in the tournament finals.

Following a bye in the opening match, Legatt notched a pair of second-round pinfalls over Toombs County's Michale Jones and Putnam County's Mark Winslette to secure a spot in the finals.

At 165 lbs, Heredia opened with a forfeit victory, then pinned Brantley County's Harlan Pruitt during the second round in match two. Heredia needed only 49 seconds to se-



Union County wrestling's six qualifiers for the State Championships have their post-tournament snack break interrupted for an impromptu photo.

cure a spot in the finals with a pinfall over Toombs County's Gailan Wilds.

Heredia finished the day with another first-round pin against Fannin County's Colby Shaw.

Clouse came in third at 132 lbs, opening the day with two first-round pins over Appling County's Brackson Carter

and Glen Hills' Artez Smith. Clouse fell during the semifinals to the eventual champion, Brantley County's Dallan Lowe.

Clouse opened the consols with a second-round pin vs. Putnam County's Jonquail Coats before dominating Banks County's Cole Hanley via a 15-2 major decision in the

consolation finals.

Whisenhunt reached the semifinals at 175 lbs, recording first-round pins against Pierce County's Ashton Castenada and Walker's Chris Soluri. After Glen Hills' Frashawn Sankoh pinned Whisenhunt in the semis, the Union senior pinned Washington County's Chance Canty in the consols.

During the third-place match, Whisenhunt pinned Jesiah Townsel in 78 seconds to take home the bronze.

Smith-Foot advanced to the semifinals via a second-round pinfall over Walker's Ty Evangelista and a third-round pin vs. Brantley's Peyton Perez. Vidalia's Gabriel Hightower edged Smith-Foot via a 7-5

decision during the semis, but Smith-Foot bounced back with a second-round pin over Mt. Paran's Ryder Schaltenbrand.

Smith-Foot dropped a 15-9 decision to Fannin County's Drake Cantrell in the consolation finals to finish fourth.

Rotko placed fifth at 138 lbs, securing a 9-5 opening bout victory over Pierce County's Zach Davis. After falling by pinfall to Putnam's Armon Webster in his second match, Rotko pinned East Jackson's Evan Reed and Mt. Paran's Wheeler Green.

Rotko suffered a loss in the consolation semifinals but rebounded in his rematch vs. Webster, earning a 12-2 major decision to take home fifth place.

Other Union County wrestlers were Riley Mortenson at 113, Thomas Gary at 120, Colson Lotts at 144 and Jackson Arthur in the 285-lb division.

On Friday night, Union senior Shelby Agacinski placed eighth at the girls' sectionals tournament in Toccoa.

The Class AA State Championships open Friday morning at the Macon Centreplex. The event wraps up on Saturday.

Lady Panthers sink Fellowship, enter Region tournament as No. 3 seed

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The Lady Panthers (14-11, 4-4) enter this week's Region 8-AA tournament as the No. 3 seed and will face second-seeded Athens Academy on Tuesday, Feb. 14 at Banks County.

By locking down a top-three seed, Union County secured its fourth consecutive State playoff berth and needs a win over Athens Academy to play in the region title game for the second time since 2020.

The Lady Panthers enter the postseason in third place via last week's 56-36 win over Fellowship Christian and Athens Academy's victory at East Jackson (11-15, 3-5). Union County went into the Feb. 7 meeting with Fellowship still in the hunt for the No. 2 seed but needed a win over the Paladins plus an East Jackson victory against Athens Academy to force a three-way tie for second. The Lady Panthers handled their business vs. Fellowship, but Athens Academy (17-5, 5-3) clinched the No. 2 seed with a 45-33 win over the Eagles.

Union County and Athens Academy will meet at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Class AA's third-ranked Banks County. The winner will face either the top-seeded Leopards (22-3, 8-0) or East Jackson on Thursday at 7:30 p.m. in Homer. Tuesday's losers will square off at 6 p.m. Thursday to determine the No. 3 and No. 4 seeds in next week's State tourney.

Speaking of state, Region 8-AA is matched with Region 7-AA in the first round. Eighth-ranked Murray County (18-4, 12-0) enters the Region 7-AA



With 15 boards vs. Fellowship, sophomore Katelyn Brown now has nine double-digit rebound games this season. Photo/Todd Forrest

tournament in first place courtesy of two wins over second-place Fannin County (18-7, 10-2). Model (13-9, 8-4) is third, followed by North Murray (14-9, 5-7), Haralson County (9-16, 4-8), Rockmart (7-18, 3-9) and Gordon Central (3-19, 0-12).

Lady Panthers 56, Fellowship Christian 36 - Union County raced ahead 21-4 and never looked back during the regular-season finale at UCHS on Tuesday, Feb. 7.

"Everyone came out and played hard on defense and it showed" Union head coach Brad Cochran said. "We forced a lot of low-percentage shots and limited their second chances."

Freshman Paula Robertson led the Lady Panthers, pouring in a career-high 13 points

and nine rebounds on 3 of 8 from 3-point range. Sophomore Ariel McCarter had 12 points and five boards; senior Corinne Hill added 11 points, seven rebounds and six assists.

"We moved the ball wing-to-wing and made the zone [defense] move and it opened up a lot of good looks," Cochran said. "And Paula, she was our spark tonight. She's been working hard in practice and it showed"

Juniors Lara Turner and Kamryn Mull, and sophomore Katelyn Brown set the tone early, pacing Union County to a 10-4 advantage. Later, a McCarter trey and a Hill jumper extended the margin to 15-4 after one quarter.

The Lady Panthers scored six straight to begin the sec-



Freshman Paula Robertson had a career-high 13 points vs. Fellowship Christian on Tuesday, Feb. 7. Photo/Todd Forrest

ond, courtesy of two McCarter 3-pointers to cap a 14-0 run at 21-4.

Fellowship responded with a triple, but Robertson scored on a putback and Turner split two free throws to mount a 24-7 lead at the 5-minute mark. But the Paladins scored seven-straight to move within 24-17 before baskets from Hill and Turner, along with a Brown free throw, sent Union into the break up 29-17.

After Fellowship started the third with a deuce, McCarter scored five in a row to build a 34-19 advantage. With Union County up 34-22 approaching the 3-minute mark of the period, Robertson drilled three long-range bombs and Hill converted an offensive rebound to build a

45-22 lead two minutes later.

Fellowship closed the third with two free throws and a trey to remain within 18 going into the final frame. Hill and Robertson continued to carry Union County in the fourth, moving the home team on top 51-27 with 5:46 remaining.

The Lady Panthers tacked on free throws from Hill and freshman Mady Adams down the stretch, followed by a deuce from sophomore Aubrie Akins.

Turner finished with 9 points and three boards; Brown pulled down 15 rebounds, dished out three assists and scored 2 points. Mull had 5 points and three boards; Adams and Akins added 2 points apiece, while senior Ivie Chapman and junior Morgan Warren each collected

three rebounds.

Team stats: Union -- 21 for 60 (35%) from the floor; 8 for 25 (32%) from three and 6 for 14 (43%) at the foul line; 52 rebounds (18 offensive); 20 points in the paint; 19 second-chance points; 8 turnovers; 4 points off turnovers. FCS -- 12 for 56 (21%) from the floor; 5 for 26 (19%) from three and 7 of 8 (88%) at the foul line; 27 rebounds (8 offensive); 10 points in the paint; 1 second-chance point; 5 turnovers; 13 points off turnovers.

Up next -- Union and Athens Academy will meet at 6 p.m. Tuesday in Banks County. Win or lose, the Lady Panthers will play on Thursday in Banks County at either 6 p.m. or 7:30 p.m.

Union and Athens Academy split the two regular-season meetings with the Spartans dominating the shorthanded Lady Panthers 41-27 in Athens on Jan. 6. The two teams met in Blairsville on Jan. 27 with Union County at full-strength. This time, the Lady Panthers led by double digits before holding off a late Spartans' surge in a 47-44 victory.

"I'm looking forward to the week off, we can use the rest," Cochran said. "We need to tone some things up. Tone up our shots. Tone up our passes."

Regular-season stat leaders: PTS - McCarter 14.5, Turner 9.2, Hill 8.2, Mull 6.0; REB - Brown 8.9, Turner 6.1; McCarter 6.0; AST - Hill 2.5, McCarter 2.0, Turner 1.6; STL - McCarter 2.3, Hill 1.9, Turner 1.8; BLK - Turner 0.4, Hill and Robertson 0.2; FG% - Warren 42%, Brown 41%, Hill 38%; 3PT% - Mull 27%, Turner 24%, McCarter 23%; FT% - McCarter 58%, Mull 57%, Hill 56%.

Baseball: Panthers fall in early-season contests vs. White and Fannin

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Union County dropped its first three games of 2023, suffering two losses to White County and one to Fannin County last week.

On Wednesday, Feb. 8, the Panthers allowed seven first-inning runs and three more in the second during a 10-1 home loss to White County. Union County fell 3-0 at Fannin County on Friday, Feb. 10, then dropped an 8-4 contest at White County the following day.

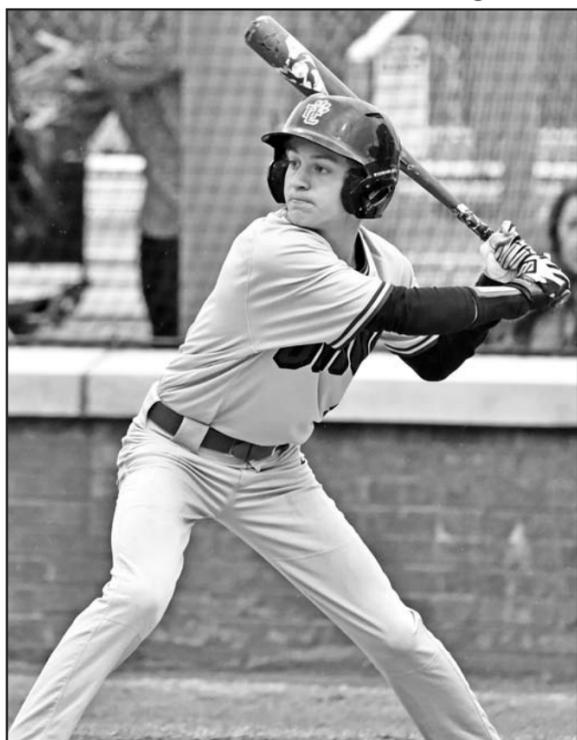
Panthers 1, White County 10 - Eli Sosensky's two-out RBI single in the fifth accounted for Union's only run of the day, driving home Maddox Patton, who reached via a one-out single -- his team's first hit of the game.

Patton's day ended 1 for 2 with a walk and a stolen base. Sosensky went 1 for 3 with two steals; Will Duncan walked twice and swiped a bag. Jordan Gilliam collected two bases on balls, a hit-by-pitch and a stolen base. Moses Stephens and Connor Swanson added one walk apiece. Brayden Sweat was hit by a pitch.

Duncan got the start on the mound and lasted one inning, giving up four hits, three walks and six earned runs. Lane Haney allowed four hits and three earned runs over two innings, surrendering three walks and a homer.

Patton walked three and fanned one in two innings of relief.

Panthers 0, Fannin County 3 - The Rebels got one



Through three games, Maddox Patton leads the Panthers with three hits, three steals and a .375 average. Photo/Todd Forrest

in the third and two in the fifth while limiting Union County to only four hits on Friday.

Duncan, Haney, Sosensky and Hunter Fleming recorded one hit each for the Panthers in their first road contest of 2023.

After stranding a pair of first-inning walks, the Panthers failed to capitalize on a Sosensky single and a double from Haney in the second. Later, Duncan laced a two-out double to center in the third, but was cut down trying to stretch it into a triple.



Freshman Eli Gwynn tossed three innings and drove in a run against White County. Photo/Todd Forrest

Down 1-0 in the fourth, Sosensky and Haney each walked but were left aboard when a pair of strikeouts ended the threat. Fleming's leadoff walk went to waste in the fifth, and Union failed to make the Rebels pay for a seventh-inning error.

Patton allowed four hits and one earned over three innings. Fleming gave up four hits and two earned runs in two innings on the mound. Duncan tossed a scoreless sixth, working around a single and a walk.



Freshman Eli Gwynn tossed three innings and drove in a run against White County. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers 4, White County 8 - Trailing 6-1, Union County scored two in the fifth and one in the sixth but gave up a pair of late-game insurance runs to the Warriors.

Patton finished 2 for 3 with two stolen bases, Eli Gwynn went 1 for 3 with an RBI and Sweat drew three walks.

The Panthers tied the game at 1-1 in the second when Gwynn walked and moved to second on Swanson's single to left field. Haney brought him home with a grounder to second after a wild pitch advanced both

runners.

White County tacked on one run in the bottom half of the inning, making it a 3-1 game, then opened up a 6-1 advantage in the fourth.

Union County got two in the fifth when Gunnar Akins walked and came around to score on Gwynn's RBI single. Later in the inning, Fleming scored via an error off the bat of Stephens.

Swanson and Akins each went 1 for 2 with Akins adding a steal. Fleming ended the game 1 for 5 with a run; Bo

Brown walked twice; Duncan and Sosensky drew one free pass each.

Gwynn yielded six hits and five earned runs over three innings. Haney allowed two hits and one run during three innings of work; Akins issued two free passes and allowed a run.

Union County hosts two home games this week, beginning with Pickens on Tuesday, Feb. 14 at 5 p.m. The Panthers welcome another Class AAA program, Lumpkin County, at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 16.